

Cache has hidden horrors

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by [Jake Euker](#)

The new Michael Haneke film *Cache* (the title is French for "hidden") is likely to confound viewers as they're watching it.

This will be especially true of Haneke's fans; two of his previous films — 1997's *Funny Games* and 2001's *The Piano Teacher* — are notorious for their hair-raising violence, the first as a comment on screen violence itself and the second as a vehicle for the portrayal of a dangerously borderline personality. Both are, in many ways, wonderful films, although viewers who can't make it through them are excused in advance.

2003's *The Time of the Wolf* can be seen, in retrospect, as a turning point; there the worst of the violence was inflicted emotionally so that while the picture was often challenging it never caused you to flinch. And now, with *Cache*, the change is complete: what's horrific here — and there is plenty of horror in the film — is, with one startling exception, completely hidden.

The brilliance of *Cache* is that it's the viewer's job to tease out where exactly that horror lies.

Cache opens with a static image of a comfortable suburban home. (The title credits, it's worth mentioning, run over this image, and they're among the coolest, aesthetically, that I've ever seen.) A man and a woman begin to discuss this image in voiceover — it turns out that the home is theirs — and before long the unmistakable visual static of a tape in fast forward mode appears on the screen.

When at last we cut away we learn that what we've been watching is a videotape that has been left on this couple's doorstep. But why? The couple — a respected television host and his professional wife — has as little idea as we do. Before long more tapes arrive, now accompanied by a child's drawings with sinister content, and by following clues that appear within the tapes, the husband eventually divines that the tapes are linked to an unsavory and long buried incident in his own past.

This secret, which the man has never shared even with his own wife, is obviously a part of the "hidden" to which the title refers. There's the camera, too, the exact position of which is never found.

But watching *Cache* — or perhaps later, as you mull it over — you begin to see that there's much more to it than what's shown on-screen, and the elements that are hidden within the film begin to multiply: the marriage itself, outwardly so happy, is shown to be anchored by a nasty game of domination; there's the possibility of an affair; Algerian immigrants (the film is set in France) conduct lives that brush against, but remain invisible to, the affluent lives at the film's center; and, finally, there's the fact of the main character's essentially prejudicial nature.

He's an intellectual and the program he hosts is about books and literature; his success — his public persona — depends upon his innate cultural chauvinism remaining the biggest secret of all.

Cache would be a remarkable film in any year, but in the wake of *Crash*'s upset victory at the Oscars it becomes essential viewing.

Crash is a film for children; it clobbers you with a witless (and surprisingly muddled) message, and at no time does it trust you to make an observation or draw a conclusion of your own.

By contrast, *Cache* is, in a narrative sense, sheer elegance. (Also elegant here, as elsewhere, is the director's unhurried technique.) Haneke provides you, for instance, with facts of the marriage at the film's center, but he never once leads you to the conclusion that its basis is hostility.

Not present is a scene in which the wife delivers a hostile glance at her husband's back or in which she divulges any understanding of the situation herself. *Is* she, in fact, aware of her unhappiness? *Cache* chooses not to say.

For some *Cache* may go too far in this direction. (The film's crucial concluding scene, in particular, is indirect enough that I nearly missed its significance.)

It's possible that many viewers, accustomed to Hollywood's obsession with tying up loose ends, will leave *Cache* feeling puzzled or unsatisfied; I know that, steeped as I am in Haneke's earlier films, I did.

But the fact is that *Cache* stays with you long after the lights have come up in the theater — how many recent movies can you say that about? — and that its horror and brilliance grow deeper with passing time.

I saw the film in New York — where it has, truly, become the film everyone's talking about — in early February, and I'm still thinking about it daily. We're lucky to have gotten *Cache* in Wichita. Don't let it get away.



***Night Watch* a nightmare**

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by [Jake Euker](#)



>SEE IT

Title: *Night Watch*

Rating: F2

Short review: *Night Watch* isn't bad, but it's not competent, exactly, either. Genre fans are directed to attend; the rest of us can catch up with it on video if the second film (it's a trilogy) improves.

I'm not splitting hairs when I say that the continuity and narrative flow of the Russian horror film *Night Watch* are a nightmare. Its inconsistencies are puzzlingly obvious, and this carelessness with the film's temporal and physical settings undermines much of its illusion.

There is, for instance, an airplane (it's either flown *from* Moscow or is flying *to* Moscow, depending on who you ask) that is in danger of entering a "vortex" that, as in *Ghostbusters*, has opened up above a Moscow apartment building. Or so we're told. But once this plane is introduced, it — like a threatened tornado — is absent for a curiously long stretch of screen time. You may begin to believe you've imagined it when, as in a dream, it reappears, still caught in the limbo you left it in all that time ago. Shouldn't the plane have flown away somewhere by now? And, if not, shouldn't the passengers and crew already be dead?

There is either a director (Timur Bekmambatov) or an editor (Dmitri Kiselyov) at fault here, and what they help to undo is the first part of an epic, three-film adaptation of Sergei Lukyanenko's novel that is not nearly so brutal as I had feared.

Night Watch, in prologue, tells of a race of "others" who share Earth with humans and who are divided into two types: good others and evil others. A truce exists between these factions, but it's

necessary nonetheless for good others to patrol the planet at night as a kind of supernatural police force, the "night watch" of the title.

Our hero Konstantin (played by Anton Gorodetsky) is a member of this force; he runs afoul of the day watch when he kills an evil other in self-defense. Meanwhile a prophesied birth has taken place that will forever tip the scales in favor of either good or evil, and our hero is brought into the fray when the child is revealed to have a personal connection to him.

Alert readers will spot a similarity to the *Star Wars* franchise in this plot synopsis, or in the uncanny coincidence of *Night Watch*'s being brought out as a trilogy.

There's much to indicate that the film's producers are hoping for a hit outside their motherland; the subtitles, for instance, are animated within the frame of the film, fading in and out, moving, throbbing, changing colors — and the subtitles are a feature that Russian audiences will not, of course, be using.

But I think that the producers will be disappointed in their hopes for *Night Watch*, despite the glut of special effects on view and the unusual density of plot. What the producers haven't purchased for *Night Watch* is the kind of killer instinct that animated every frame of *Star Wars*, and that instinct is something audiences read rather than they're aware of it or not.

George Lucas never left us wondering where a plane was, and if he had none of us would know what a wookiee is today.

Night Watch isn't a bad genre film — it's watchable and sometimes inventive — but it hasn't got its basics covered. The producers have gotten their priorities all wrong.



Intense *Scared* drowns in hysteria

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by [Jake Euker](#)



THE BILLY CRYSTAL VERSION WAS CALMER:

Running Scared is an intense movie that just goes way too far in revealing the depths of man's depravity.



LET THE BODIES HIT THE FLOOR: Wayne Kramer (*The Cooler*) is a very skilled director, but he lets the audience in on his intentions a little too late in *Running Scared*.

>SEE IT

Title: *Running Scared*

Rating: F3

Short review: Too frantic and scattered to achieve its goal (and it does have one), *Running Scared* assaults the viewer without letting up long enough for the viewer to get in on the very dark joke.

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he new Wayne Kramer film — the title isn't *Scared Shitless*, but it's something like that, and I'm still too pissed to look it up — runs a steady 15 to 20 degrees too hot.

The director is shooting for an extreme movie experience, and indeed it sometimes feels as though you're playing *Scared Shitless* rather than watching it.

But the movie's franticness extends into areas where it's not needed — into Paul Walker's lead performance, for instance — and the brute aggression of Kramer's pacing and editing becomes personal for the audience a long time before it's over.

Worse, the picture's unfluctuating hysteria undermines what the director is trying to do, and for once we have a director who was trying to do something.

As it stands, *Scared Shitless* is an assault, and when the credits ran at the end my impulse was to strike back. It takes a little bit of time and distance to see that it's not so bad a film as I first

thought although I'm still smarting.

Where *Scared Shitless* is concerned I'm a victim who has decided, maybe unwisely, not to press charges.

Scared Shitless chronicles 18 really extraordinary hours in the life of a small-time New Jersey gangster pointedly named Joey Gazelle (Walker) and of a 10-year-old boy (Oleg Yugorsky, played by Cameron Bright) who has the bad luck to be Gazelle's neighbor.

Or maybe Oleg's bad luck was to live in this particular town? It's called Grimley, and it's populated exclusively with murderers, perverts, and drug addicts. Even Grimley's most sympathetic and intelligent resident, Gazelle's wife, kills a couple in cold blood, and she does it with little Oleg looking on.

Scared Shitless goes too far, but how far too far? As an illustration, let me recount what befalls Oleg in those 18 hours.

(Those who haven't seen the film may wish to skip this paragraph.) Oleg is introduced — a flash-forward excluded — playing hockey with Gazelle's son in his neighbor's basement, where he watches as Gazelle stashes some guns that have been used to kill a group of cops. Before returning home he steals one, which he uses minutes later to gun down his meth-smoking father as he beats Oleg's mother. Oleg escapes to an abandoned building in a park where he's abducted by a crackhead (this crackhead speaks the way I imagine that the Gollum did in *The Hobbit*). The crackhead murders a pair of drug dealers in a shoot-out, and Oleg escapes again, next encountering a lunatic pimp who's beating a prostitute nearly to death because he's discovered that the prostitute is studying nights to get her G.E.D. Oleg pulls his gun on the pimp, and he and the prostitute run off into the night. When Oleg stops breathing due to asthma, the prostitute uses the gun to acquire an inhaler from a pharmacist who otherwise refuses to help. Cured, Oleg and the prostitute are nabbed by the (crooked) police, who surprisingly release Oleg into the custody of his now-recovered dad. Oleg's dad once again threatens him, so Oleg seeks refuge in a nearby van where he is surprised to find two other children waiting. The van's owners, discovering him, welcome him into their home. Do I need to tell you that they're pedophiles? Gazelle's wife rescues Oleg just in time — he's been hog-tied with a plastic bag over his head — and then kills the pedophiles. Gazelle, who is trying to retrieve the gun that Oleg stole from his basement, then takes Oleg for a ride to a deserted warehouse district where Oleg watches as a business associate of Gazelle's shoots a third man point blank in the forehead. The next stop is an ice rink where a dozen or so Mafiosi are tortured and killed (Oleg's father is there and is ordered to kill Oleg, which he nearly does). Gazelle saves Oleg, and although Gazelle has been hit in the head three times with a hockey puck fired at him by a professional hockey player, he decides to stop to get Oleg some food rather than drive straight home or, better yet, to a hospital. Unfortunately for them, that same killer pimp arrives at the diner. While trying to kill Oleg, he mortally wounds Gazelle who then more or less dies while driving Oleg home at 60 miles per hour down residential streets while Oleg's mom, at home, deliberately blows herself to bits in her husband's meth lab.

Bear in mind, please, that Gazelle himself is undergoing a related but discrete series of such incidents on camera, and you maybe begin to see how frenzied an enterprise *Scared Shitless*

really is.

Kramer, who wrote as well as directed, is an intelligent man. His last film was the skillful *The Cooler*, and in many ways *Scared Shitless* is skillful too. But Kramer intends for *Scared Shitless* to be read as blackly comic, and he clues the audience in too late on his intentions. The opening scenes feel ridiculously, self-consciously gritty and "real" — "real" in a tricked-out, Tarantino sense — and it opens with such intensity that you don't feel it escalating into the absurd.

When Oleg, barricaded into a bathroom, hears one of the pedophiles approaching, but sees instead the silhouette of Nosferatu through the room's smoked glass wall, it doesn't feel like a directorial flourish — it feels like the director has lost his mind. (Chazz Palminteri, who appears as one of the crooked cops, is made up like Count Dracula, and the joke is surely intentional although it was lost on me in the mayhem.)

You can admire what Kramer was trying to do only later (the animated credit sequence, which appears at film's end, makes his Grand Guignol, absurdist intentions plain) because the intensity of his movie is unvaried, and he doesn't show his hand in time.

The easiest way for Kramer to indicate where he was headed was to introduce stylization into *Scared Shitless* as it moved along. Instead, the picture is shot and edited so trickily from the outset that it feels like showing off, and the content — *Scared Shitless* is packed with content — isn't far behind.

One of the many, many bad guys in *Scared Shitless* is a Russian who idolizes John Wayne — not a bad joke, and one that works on a couple of levels. When, near the film's end, this man is shot in such a way that his John Wayne tattoo appears to be crying blood, I was aware of the fact that I was too tired to respond.

The Cooler boasted similar jokes, but far more sparingly, and they shone. In *Scared Shitless*, Kramer is trying to knock us out. It works.



The curse of the *Pink Panther* returns

Originally published February 23, 2006

by [Jake Euker](#)



STEVE MARTIN, YOU SUCK: Martin's Clouseau is less like a Frenchman and more like a gay buyer for Pottery Barn.

>SEE IT

Title: *Pink Panther*

Rating: F1

Short review: An example of the very worst Hollywood has to offer: It's grotesquely unfunny, unshaped, and almost undirected.

If it were just a little longer, I would be writing that the remake of *Pink Panther* in theaters now couldn't be any worse. It could, I have to grant that, at just more than 90 minutes, the film is mercifully shorter than most any movie I've seen lately. I want to specify though, that in another five minutes I would have left the theater whether *Pink Panther* was over or not. The only reason that I saw the end is that I was with a friend who couldn't believe what he'd seen so far and reasoned that it had to get better.

I could write twenty thousand words about how bad *Pink Panther* is and why, but who cares? The filmmakers don't give a shit about their movie, so why should I? I thus will leave the following topics to other critics to cover:

* The ways that *Pink Panther* makes Blake Edwards, who directed the original two films and several of the '70s sequels, look less like a skilled craftsmen and more like a pioneering and wholly original cinematic giant;

* How the defiant incompetence of the new film threatens to artificially inflate the reputations of the often funny but never great originals;

* The fact that the new film transforms what was originally entertainment targeted at adults into yet more toothless pabulum proffered as inoffensive "family" fare, and my related fear that one

day soon adults will have no entertainment left of their own;

* The fact that the original concept — a dim-witted French detective bungles an investigation — is hardly so ingenious that it couldn't have been reconceived as original material rather than remade; and

* The apparent, impending death of screen comedy as evidenced by the success of *Pink Panther* at the box office.

That still leaves quite a bit to go over, and I'll start with the worst. In 1983, following the death of Peter Sellers (the original Inspector Jacques Clouseau), a newcomer named Ted Wass was cast in the central role of *The Curse of the Pink Panther*. Mr. Wass must have had more talent than audiences who saw *The Curse of Pink Panther* were led to believe; otherwise he would never have been cast in any movie at all. Still, his performance, and the movie itself, were so bad that Mr. Wass more or less disappeared from public view.

I mention this now because I believe that, were he just starting out, as Mr. Wass was, Steve Martin's performance in *Pink Panther* would kill his career as effectively as Mr. Wass' did his.

As Inspector Clouseau, Martin is not just substantially but exponentially worse than he's ever been before, and you don't need to compare him to Peter Sellers to see it. (You can, in fact, add a comparison of Martin to Sellers to my list of topics for other critics above.) He gives his Clouseau a manner so mincing and prissy that it seems weird when he expresses interest in a woman, and his costume — he wears four-button suit jackets with high rolls and narrow lapels, and the center of his eyebrows have been plucked away to match his carefully groomed mustache — makes him seem less like a Frenchman and more like a gay buyer for Pottery Barn.

If his appearance makes you uncomfortable, just wait until he opens his mouth. Martin's delivery is stone dead here (particularly embarrassing is a running gag in which he pretends to be discussing the weather while checking rooms he's entered for spies), but his accent is too misconceived and appalling to be believed — not appallingly funny, as Sellers's was, but *appallingly* appalling like a high school sketch in which children who have never heard a Frenchman speak substitute a lisp, winks, and lot of "ooh-la-las." Most mysterious to me was his tendency to substitute a "w" sound for an "r", so that a word like "rare" comes out as "wawe." That's not French; that's the Shaggs. If you're comfortable laughing at harelips, it might leave you rolling in the aisles.

As Chief Inspector Dreyfus — the Herbert Lom role — Kevin Kline is surprising too: he's every bit as bad. Maybe worse? Watching him perform baffled me; where Steve Martin is lazy and stupid as Clouseau, you at least get the sense that he's performing on some level. Kline is barely reading lines.

For Dreyfus he's developed some off-putting hand motions — he keeps his hands weirdly flat while gesturing — and he speaks in an accent impossible to identify as French or anything else. And that's all. He never loses it, really, as Lom did, and he doesn't seem to be containing anything. It's a non-performance or maybe a quarter of a performance. He's not there.

To be fair, no one is, and part of the reason that I found it difficult to look at the screen for

stretches of *Pink Panther* is that I was embarrassed for otherwise talented actors — Martin and Kline, who are needed to anchor the film, excluded — who couldn't find a foothold in the film's central void.

I'm a fan of Destiny's Child and hence looked forward to Beyonce Knowles' debut, but having seen it I'd rather not comment on it except to say that a debut in *Pink Panther* shouldn't count. When, near the film's end, she finally gets a chance to sing, those assholes Martin and Kline take up all her screen time.

Speaking of Kevin Kline and screen time, I think it's important to note that his character — essentially the villain of the piece — vanishes from view for the bulk of *Pink Panther*.

Director Shawn Levy is a true incompetent — he shows no gift for filmmaking at all — and his lack of intuition is most glaringly evident in the picture's movement. (His absolute and deadly lack of comic timing comes in a close second.)

Pink Panther has no plot. Animals, I imagine, have dreams with better narrative integrity. Instead there are bungled gags, and these are inserted anywhere: Clouseau, in the middle of one scene, picks up a laser pointer and dicks around with it, halting the action and then puts it down and the scene lurches forward again without a pay-off and with nowhere to go.

In one important set piece, the inspector attempts to seduce the Beyonce character, leading to a frantically unfunny joke about a lost Viagra pill; when the joke grinds to a close, the scene ends. Was the seduction successful? No one knows.

When a film is as bad as *Pink Panther*, there's one element that's almost always present: studio interference. (The obverse is the *Heaven's Gate* syndrome in which an untested director is given carte blanche after producing a hit.) Word is that the studio stepped in with *Pink Panther*, forcing a re-shoot of some scenes in order to ensure its milquetoast content and family-friendly PG rating and to thus further inflate their returns on this investment — and an investment is all *Pink Panther* is.

Nothing was lost; Steve Martin would have sunk this picture without his director's, co-stars', screenwriters' (of which he was one), or studio's help.

The calamity is that it worked.



***The New World* is pretty yet monotonous**

Originally published January 26, 2006

by [Jake Euker](#)



DREAMY: Colin Farrell plays Captain John Smith, a sailor who lands on the coast of Virginia and is captured by natives but saved by the chief's daughter, Matoaka (a.k.a. Pocahontas).

>*SEE IT*

Title: *The New World*

Rating: F3

Short review: This fourth feature of director Terrence Malick's 30-odd-year career offers a lot of now-familiar style; it's often gorgeous, and Malick's voyeuristic technique is like that of no other, but what started out as enthusiasm lapsed into something like boredom by the film's end.



HISTORICAL OR NOT: Q'Orianka Kilcher plays Matoaka (known to history as Pocahontas) in a subtle way that defies stereotypes, but the overall film so transcends reality that the star-crossed lovers could be any star-crossed lovers.

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errence Malick's is maybe the most voyeuristic camera in contemporary film. In *The New World*, every shot feels subjective, as though the audience is an unseen participant in the proceedings; we glide into the action half expecting the participants to acknowledge us, or we move through a scene at eye level, the camera surveying the surroundings like a sentient being.

Although the film is not shot as point-of-view, there is little about it that feels objective; it's like a

dream being had by its characters that the audience inhabits.

The character having that dream, for the first half of *The New World*, is Captain John Smith (Colin Farrell), who arrives with his fellow British sailors on the coast of Virginia in 1607. As the Englishmen go about constructing their first settlement, the film lingers mainly in the company of Smith, who surveys the land, assesses the native Powhatans, and eventually leads a delegation of his men on a mission to contact a powerful native king said to be living further inland.

Malick edits the material as a collage of sound and images rather than as a narrative so that when the men come under attack the details of the event remain unclear. Smith is separated from the rest, or perhaps survives them and is taken prisoner; when he is brought before the Powhatan chief, his life is spared at the request of the chief's daughter, Matoaka (known in history books as Pocahontas and played here by Q'orianka Kilcher), and the picture's point of view is broadened to include Matoaka's as the central romance gets underway.

Malick is a formalist, not a storyteller. He imparts the plot of his material in the barest ways imaginable (and he can't handle much of it, as his last film, *The Thin Red Line* shows).

In *The New World*, he's condensed Smith's adventures so that the occasional line of dialogue is enough to propel the plot, while widening the scope of the romance, which he conveys stylistically, beyond what we know to be true.

Malick has made only four movies in his 30-odd-year career, but his style has been largely in place from the beginning: There's the camerawork, the introspective narration (it feels like eavesdropping), the preoccupation with his film's environmental settings, the collage-like editing, and the sound design that emphasizes ambient, natural noises.

Malick hasn't chosen Smith and Matoaka's romance for its historical interest; he's chosen it because the prospect of introducing white Europeans into a wondrous new world appeals to his instincts as a filmmaker.

In this way his technique fits his material hand-in-glove. The film's opening passages are particularly powerful: images of a virgin American shore are punctuated by those of convincingly exotic Powhatans and muffled flashes of violence, the otherness of this new world underlined by James Horner's stately, awestruck score. When a romance — a cross-cultural, wordless romance — is introduced, it fits the film's atmosphere as naturally as birdsong.

There will be many who will find the film rapturous and almost painfully beautiful, and in the beginning it is. But the fact is that Malick's style varies so little — both from film to film and within *The New World* itself — that its hypnotic demeanor begins to tire.

Halfway through *The New World* you begin to long for a change of tone. (Malick's films never contain frivolous material; even those passages that would be light-hearted in another filmmaker's hands are muted and trancelike in Malick.)

Even the director's proficiency, displayed in scene after scene, becomes suspect; you begin to feel that his effects come very easily to him. Why doesn't he stretch?

As characters Smith and Matoaka might have been anyone; that is to say, their function within the film is so non-specific that Malick might have used the story of any two humans who fall in love despite cultural differences and he would have ended up with a similar result.

In voiceover Smith and Matoaka express their wonder and existential ruminations ("How many lands behind me? How many seas? What is this voice that speaks within me?"); Malick wants to show that their longings are universal (and his WWII soldiers in *The Thin Red Line* pondered very similar questions) but their inquiries are so broad as to sound generic instead. Worse, these hushed sentiments tread perilously close to doggerel, something produced in a high school poetry workshop, and with undertakings this grave the line between laughable and deep grows thin.

Parts of *The New World* are elating.

I admire Malick's way with action in the film; he intercuts images of the benign amid images of brutality, building carefully-wrought montage, and he tampers with or removes the audio track so that his violence has the quality of remembered experience. It's as though he's sealed these episodes of conflict away in amber.

His work with landscape is magically evocative, and when people appear within his meditative natural settings, it can seem like the easternmost work of Frederick Remington has been brought to life.

Farrell serves well as the adventurer Smith, and Kilcher defies Native American screen stereotypes as Matoaka; that is to say, she exhibits intuition and simplicity without appearing to be simple-minded (or, worse, so burdened with wisdom that the weight of it inflicts lockjaw).

Malick errs toward political correctness in his conception of Matoaka: she knows no lust (Smith doesn't much either), she's unerringly good, and her conversion to Christianity is downplayed so determinately that it's almost not there. But Kilcher remains fluid, dynamic, and believable, and the scenes of her Matoaka (the name reportedly meant "playful one") behaving as she normally does during a visit to England are the closest the film ever comes to being traditionally amusing.

But despite its real virtues, there's a facility and an aesthetic single-mindedness to *The New World* that, for me, undermines its conception. What started out as enthusiasm for the film faded, as I watched it, into admiration and then something like boredom.

It didn't hold me as a film like *Koyaanisqatsi* does, and given Malick's by-the-way use of narrative, his weighty intent, and trancelike camerawork, is the effect he reaches for really so different?

Terrence Malick is a director of undeniable talent, but after this fourth film, I feel his career, like his films, building toward something without quite getting there. I'm ready to see what he can really do.



Films of 2005, for better or worse

A film discussion amongst our critics.

Jake Euker:

A box-office slump? I just found about it in Jason's piece, but maybe it's good news.

Maybe the right perspective is that audiences have taken such a painful, uninterrupted beating in the theaters in the last decade — the worst for American movies, in my opinion, since the twilight of the big studios in the late '50s and early '60s — that they justifiably made the decision to stay home. Why shouldn't they?

Taking their cues from Spielberg and Lucas, Hollywood has long since adopted the event-driven production mindset that prevents the small picture from ever being made while drowning in budget anything that could be described as an "adventure."

Spielberg also taught financiers the principle that a box office golden boy must not be interfered with (in the early 1970s we didn't interfere with *artists*, and there's a difference) with the result that the world is now saddled with Peter Jackson.

If people are staying away, even in small numbers, from his hairy, absurd *King Kong*, I salute them.

I've also recently noticed that when I ask people to go to movies with me, they ask how long they are. Of course they do! Hurray! Take back your cineplexes!

If you had asked me a year ago, and I felt like replying honestly, I would have told you that I hated movies. Jason, who's always been kinder and more optimistic, would have pointed out something worthwhile about them, and of course he would have been right. Now I find that maybe I'm the optimistic one. It seems to me that 2005 was a big improvement over recent years, at least in American film.

Why? First off, although I'll never *willingly* compile a list of anything, I think that I could find 10 movies I loved from last year without having to include a *Finding Nemo* and thus reducing what was once America's great, populist art form to another children's pastime in which adults are welcome to participate.

Second, it seems to me that a larger slate of interesting, small movies was made available in 2005 than has been in many, many years.

And finally, although I'll argue the stupidity of *A History of Violence* to the death (which is where all Cronenberg's features wind up), at least I'll be holding an actual discussion when I do it. Defending my ever-deepening contempt of *The Lord of the Rings* is a non-argument: You either suck down Jackson's self-congratulation or you don't. *A History of Violence* was ridiculous to me,

but at least an argument can be made in its favor that extends deeper than "It was faithful to Tolkien's great books."

For a few hours in 2005, I had fun at the movies.

Sometimes I felt like the only one: *The Brothers Grimm* and Roman Polanski's *Oliver Twist* charmed me, but critics and audiences rained abuse or indifference on them. There were *The Squid and the Whale*, *Good Night and Good Luck*, and *The Constant Gardener*, a trio of titles I would be grateful for in any year. I fell in love with Heath Ledger in *Brokeback Mountain*, and I might have fallen in love with Michelle Williams too if she had gotten a few more chances to address me. Randy Quaid was marvelous. I puzzled at Spielberg's dual spin-outs — *War of the Worlds* and *Munich* — but at least he had me wondering. A graver disappointment was Wong Kar-Wai's limp, drenched *2054*; I looked forward to for so long and then the movie was so endless. Maybe the name should be changed to Wong Kar-Wait, with a "t."

Eli Roth's audacious *Hostel*, with its high-school phallic symbolism and cartoon gore, was a mess, but I had a blast watching it, exactly as I did at the first two *Evil Dead* films; when, exiting, I heard audience members deriding it, I remembered how the audience hated De Palma's *The Fury*, whereas I was leaving it in a state of bliss. *Hostel* gave me hope for the horror film — my favorite genre — which has lately been the focus of gore and nothing else.

It will take a lot of imagination to redeem horror from the mire of *High Tension*, *Wolf Creek*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Saw*, *House of Wax*, and so on, forever and ever, and it could be that Roth is the person to do it. Can it work? Ideally other young filmmakers will follow his lead.

Jason talks of a wealth of bad movies. Undoubtedly he's right, but I'm hopeful all the same. I don't want to tear into the reasons for what I see as an improvement too much; maybe I don't want to jinx it or maybe I just don't know.

What I can say is that I used to really love movies, and there were times in 2005 when I thought I did again. The last several years have given me a chance to fill in the blanks in what I know about earlier eras and unfamiliar genres and movements in film; maybe 2006 will get me away from the DVD player and TCM, and back in the theaters again.



***Brokeback* stands solid and big**

Originally published January 12, 2006

by [Jake Euker](#)



HOME ON THE RANGE: Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger (who is starring in *Casanova* now too) play a pair of cowboys who find comfort in each other's arms, even if they aren't comfortable with it.

>SEE IT

Title: *Brokeback Mountain*

Rating: F5

Short review: There's very little in the cold, clear air of *Brokeback Mountain* that isn't first rate, but the film's scope is so much bigger and operatic than the unadorned lives at its center that something feels a little amiss. It's likely to reward your time even if its message of tolerance is something you already learned.

I was catching up with former F5 movie critic Johnny Szlauderbach on new releases the other day and I was surprised that he hadn't yet seen *Brokeback Mountain*.

"I know I need to see it," he said, "but it feels like an assignment."

Watching Heath Ledger make out with another man didn't feel like an assignment to *me*, but suddenly I could kind of understand how a 21-year-old straight guy might view the movie: an endless non-romance conducted in period dress, like *Cold Mountain* or *The Notebook*. And what could sound more unendurable than *The Notebook*? None of us at F5 would even agree to attend it.

I later remembered Johnny's indifference as the lights came up on the sold-out, opening night *Brokeback Mountain* screening I attended; *Brokeback Mountain* is an unquestionable improvement on *Cold Mountain*, it's wonderfully acted and beautifully shot, and it lays a genuine claim on your emotions.

But I still might not be urging Johnny to attend.

Why not? I want to say first off that I disagree with the idea that *Brokeback Mountain* is not a gay love story but rather a *human* love story, as one reviewer put it.

It seems to me that if you change the sex of one of the principals, there's very little left in the film in the way of conflict or psychological complexity, and that the gay content is the justification for ever having made the film in the first place. Play *Brokeback Mountain* straight and there's nothing there.

Brokeback Mountain's central gay relationship, while possibly the cause of token controversy, is undoubtedly the reason for the film's success: the cultural zeitgeist toward acceptance of gays rewards those who praise the film and it has thus become the vehicle by which audiences (and, I hereby predict, the Oscars) showcase their open-mindedness.

I wouldn't warn anyone away from *Brokeback Mountain*, but I also don't think that there's much about tolerance that Johnny, with his gay best friend, has left to learn. And without that, the possibility that the film will feel, to some, like a longish, if not endless, non-romance in period clothes might indeed arise.

Brokeback Mountain, as everyone now knows, tells the story of Ennis del Mar (Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal), a pair of cowboys who fall aggressively and very physically in love while tending a flock of sheep on the title mountain in Wyoming in 1963. When the seasonal shepherding job comes to an end, the two part in confusion, meeting again four years later after Ennis has married and fathered two daughters and Jack has relocated to Texas. Their passion is reignited and thus is begun a long-term affair conducted only during Jack's brief, occasional visits to Wyoming.

The spare timetable of their relationship is an enormous frustration to both men; Ennis, whose story we follow most closely, bears it in silence, while Jack tries Ennis's patience by pressing for more, and their relationship, never exactly idyllic, is thereby strained to breaking.

There isn't much meat to this plot — it was thin even in Annie Proulx's short story, which served as the basis for Larry McMurtry's screenplay — and director Ang Lee spends a good part of *Brokeback Mountain* showing how Jack swallows compromises while Ennis stalls. (What drew Lee to this material in the first place puzzles me: there's no action, and Proulx's fitful prose style isn't something to which a quick visual correlation can be found.)

One expects to find the men's passion at the heart of the film, but Lee devotes surprisingly little screen time to it, as though he wants the film to observe the same ratio of time-together versus time-apart that the men experience in their lives.

Lee, like Proulx, strives for an undiscussed, taciturn romance — he wants to portray a love affair between two strapping, non-verbal, men-are-from-Mars men. Thus Jack and Ennis's rough lovemaking and unspoken yearning never grow on-screen into intimacy, trust, or love; unguarded moments are never exchanged between the two; and we never see them get drunk on physical contact or experience amazement at having found themselves where they are.

Instead, their time together, following a first angry tryst, comprises a modicum of horseplay and a lot of deep looks by one man directed at the other, who's typically looking away. So it goes, with the occasional touch or kiss, until the pressure of estrangement jeopardizes what little happiness the two do manage.

Near the end, when tempers flare, it feels as though we've jumped from Jack's initial, fumbling overtures in a dark tent to Ennis yelling, "You ever heard of child support?" with nothing much in between.

Brokeback Mountain's primary salvation is its performances.

Heath Ledger has always been a likeable presence, but with his indistinctive good looks, projected decency, and face-in-the-crowd voice and carriage, he needs solid talent to rise from a generic leading guy to stardom. He's always made an effort, but in Ennis del Mar he gets his first real role and his work is absolutely top-notch. Ledger's Ennis speaks from his chest, as though forming words required the same muscular effort as baling hay. It's work; he can do it, the same as he can saddle a horse or operate a forklift, but why would he unless it needs to be done?

Because he expresses nothing, he's able to hide his feelings for Jack fairly effortlessly; when Jack first meets Ennis's wife, she's never even heard his name. But when too much gets bottled up he tends to explode (Lee signals this symbolically with fireworks, hailstorms, bulls bursting through gates, and fistfights), and Ledger portrays these episodes extraordinarily, channeling his character's anger, guilt, sadness, and sexual frustration into a wordless, physical rage.

It's scary, but it's scarily sexy, too. Ennis, as scripted, isn't necessarily a looker; what's sexy about him, besides his mythic association to the cowboy tradition, is the easy masculinity that results from his having worked with his sweat and muscles for a living and, partly, that same lack of access to words.

Ledger gives Ennis a stoop-shouldered walk that's the opposite of glamorous and when he strips down he's naked and a little vulnerable rather than buff. We're not wowed by Ennis's seductiveness all at once, as we usually are at the movies; instead, we notice details about him — the curl in his hair at the sideburns, his sleepy eyes, the worn fit of his jeans — and we react more deeply to his sexiness, as we would in life as opposed to fantasy.

Obviously Ledger is a handsome man, but in *Brokeback Mountain* he performs as though the thought had never occurred to him. It certainly hasn't crossed his character's mind.

Jack Twist's sexiness *has* occurred to him. His name fits his character like a glove; Jake Gyllenhaal's Jack is part cowboy and part come-on, and the fact that he rides in the rodeo, as opposed to Ennis, who sticks to ranching, succinctly expresses the difference between the two.

Gyllenhaal plays Jack so that he's showy — his posturing begins the moment he arrives on screen — and where Ennis is oblivious to his own charms, Jack understands that the word "cowboy" carries a little cachet. If he's only marginally more expressive than Ennis when it comes to their relationship it's because that's the only part of his life that isn't at least partly for show.

That expressiveness is what's most surprising about Gyllenhaal. In *Brokeback Mountain* he's all forehead — it's the opposite of *Donnie Darko*, where he stared out from under his lowering brow — and his big, black eyebrows jump up and down beneath the brim of his black hat like inverted smiles. I don't mean for it to sound like a gay joke when I say that he's a dead ringer for k.d. lang here; even his manner on horseback had me thinking of her.

Gyllenhaal has received a lot of praise for this performance, but I wasn't quite sure at first how much of his posturing *is* posturing and how much a really daring performance in which posturing is portrayed. It can be a razor-thin line between a great performance and a rotten one, but my inclination is to give him the win.

What neither actor can manage completely is the feat of making Proulx's dialogue, much of which McMurtry retains, sound plausible. In the context of her quirky, colloquial prose, the cowboys' terse declarations read as exaggeration of their circumstances rather than spoken English: they're archetypal.

While McMurtry's additions are often slyly amusing ("Bring some rattlesnake if you think of it," Ennis tells his wife, who's heading out on errands), it's stretching the abilities of any actor to saddle him with a line such as, "Old Brokeback got us good and it sure ain't over." Ledger's last line ("Jack, I swear ...") reads as comic understatement when it's meant to deliver the script's final — almost only — emotional blow.

Proulx's fiction is lively with descriptive flavor even when the undertakings are spare. As he did with Rick Moody's novel *The Ice Storm*, Lee substitutes solemnity; his tendency is to slow his material down for scrutiny, and it's a technique that both does and doesn't fit the film. Certainly *Brokeback Mountain*'s vast landscapes and atmosphere of repression lend themselves to gravity, but the film's slow pace can sometimes lead you to feel that you're watching characters knock around a big, empty movie in exactly the same way that they knock around the movie's big, empty landscape. This may be a victory of style, but for some it will be a Pyrrhic victory. There's something serenely Asian in the way Lee shoots landscape and the movement of people within it. (Cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto does marvelous work here, and he gives the film little dynamic flourishes.) Although much has been made of the fact that *Brokeback Mountain*'s subject matter subverts the western form, in reality the film has nothing to do with westerns save for the fact that its characters wear cowboy hats. The context within which the film seems most familiar is that of the Japanese period drama; place the action amid samurai and suddenly all those pregnant silences make cultural sense.

The supporting cast of *Brokeback Mountain* is all aces, but they might have been made more interesting in the process of extending Proulx's short story to feature length.

As Ennis's wife Alma, Michelle Williams bridles at the limitations of her character, which is essentially that of a dramatic foil; you can see that she wants to do more than address what Proulx calls "misery looks" at her husband and you believe that she could do it, too. You can't help but wish that Lee had sacrificed some of the film's austerity for a few scenes in which her Alma was given some rope.

As Mr. Aguirre, a no-bullshit sheep rancher, Randy Quaid inhabits his small-minded regional big shot so completely that you almost don't recognize the actor (and he carries off two of the film's

worst lines: its first — "If you pair of deuces are looking for work, I suggest you get your skinny asses in here pronto" — and another in which Jack and Ennis's love life is mysteriously described, from Proulx, as "stemming the rose").

There is, in fact, very little in the cold, clear air of *Brokeback Mountain* that isn't first rate. If I say that there's too much of it, I'm repeating myself — I say that about almost every movie I've seen for the past few years, and, worse, I'm not getting at exactly what I mean.

It isn't that *Brokeback Mountain* is padded out and thus overlong or that its director retained material that might have been thrown away. It's that the film's conception is so much bigger and more operatic than its unadorned story and the inarticulate lives and relationship at its core. Why? What justifies the extra scrutiny?

And it's here that I want to say that if you don't think that the sexual orientation of its principals is central to *Brokeback Mountain*, think again. It is in most ways a wonderful film, but its argument may, for many of us, already seem strangely under- and overdone.



***Munich* has good material, lacks spine**

Originally published January 5, 2006

by [Jake Euker](#)



BROTHERS IN ARMS: The whole problem with Steven Spielberg's *Munich* is that the director wants to entertain us but then slaps us good and hard. He also wants us to agree with him on a point that we can't quite understand. Oh, and the movie's too long.

>*SEE IT*

Rating: F2

Short review: *Munich* has a fascinating, morally ambiguous story to tell, but Spielberg's method is to coerce, not to illuminate, and his picture is filled with undirected anger; he strives so hard to be even-handed that he never takes a stand.

M

any years ago a friend of mine suffering from paranoid delusions was confined to a psychiatric ward. There he overheard a young woman urgently listing into a payphone the agencies that were involved in whatever imagined conspiracy had landed her there, and among the usual culprits — the CIA, the FBI, Interpol, and so on — my friend heard her list Steven Spielberg's production company Dreamworks. Later, after treatment, my friend reported his bemused dismissal of the woman's rant: *Dreamworks* wasn't in on it.

Or so he thought at the time.

After seeing Spielberg's new movie *Munich*, that anecdote returned to me, and weighing the evidence of the film's content, *Time*'s rave cover review written by Spielberg collaborator Richard Schickel, and the strange omission of *Munich*'s run time on IMDb, I began to wonder if evidence of a conspiracy didn't exist. *They don't want you to know how long it is.*

And certainly you don't have to qualify for treatment to see that Spielberg has made *Munich* with an agenda in mind.

But then again, this is a troubled, schizophrenic feature; what's ultimately more challenging than

detecting an agenda is pinning down what exactly it might be.

Munich opens with a wonderfully economical recap of the kidnapping of 11 Israeli athletes by Palestinian terrorists at the 1972 Munich Olympic Games, and then follows a group of Israeli agents, led by a former soldier identified only as Avner (Eric Bana), in its effort to assassinate the 11 Palestinians deemed responsible.

From the very start the details suggest a thriller: Avner is told that his mission is dangerous, that he'll not be able to contact his pregnant wife, that he'll receive his funds from a safe-deposit box anonymously held in Switzerland, and that, to the state, he doesn't exist. He meets his team members only after their mission has begun, and these men exhibit the kind of quirks found in spy stories: one is fastidious, one impetuous, one builds toys.

The Palestinians they seek are spread throughout Europe, and the picture, once underway, is a kind of travelogue of revenge wherein Spielberg shoots transitions in a breezy cinematic shorthand common to the international spy genre, from Alfred Hitchcock right down through Jason Bourne (a view of the Eiffel Tower announces our arrival in Paris, for example), and the different stops on the itinerary — London, Athens, Cyprus — are given subtly different visual treatments, emphasizing their foreignness and sense of place.

The premise of *Munich*, as everyone knows, is fact, and the circumstances — young Jews murdered in their prime, and on German soil — remain painful and vivid more than 30 years later. (Although I was only 10 at the time, I can still recall anchorman Jim McKay quietly announcing "They're all gone" when word came that all 11 Israelis had been killed.)

It would require unimaginable insensitivity to build an escapist adventure on those 11 graves. Spielberg understands this, but his approach to the material, while not exactly insensitive, lacks judgment all the same.

Running against the film's fluid, commercial style is a much stronger current of moral instruction. (Spielberg's worst liability as a director is his inclination toward skin-deep humanist pedantry as exhibited in condescending, self-conscious "masterpieces" such as *The Color Purple*, *Amistad*, and *Schindler's List*.) In *Munich* he's taken on a big subject — one that occupies a complicated moral landscape — and his compulsion toward high-minded moral leadership is at odds with his basic instincts as an entertainer.

There is no such conflict in *Schindler's List* because there is no opportunity for conflict; glamour and gratuitous thrills are obviated by the literal-mindedness of the horror.

In *Munich*, where one assassination is carried out by a remote-activated bomb in a 1970s Paris neighborhood, to use one example, the temptation is apparently there. In the scene in question, a little *parisienne* of nine or 10 years is seen playing the piano in her school uniform in the apartment where the bomb is to be hidden; it is thus forecasted that, without fail, an unexpected turn of events will place her back in the apartment just seconds before the blast.

We don't know the details of that blast — no one does — but the presence of this little girl isn't likely to be found in the historical record. Although ostensibly her imperilment serves as a gauge of the humanity of the Jewish assassins (they race to prevent the bomb from detonating), what it

and several other sequences *feel* like are suspenseful flourishes, bits of excitement and fun weirdly appended to an ugly story of cold-blooded murder and revenge.

But straight reporting isn't what we expect from Spielberg, and that goes for motives as well as explosions.

In *Munich* the director shows a near mania for even-handedness: One Palestinian provides a summation of the grievances harbored against Israel by his people before getting himself kacked, another short-lived character explains the importance, to Arabs, of the concept of "home," a Mossad agent (Geoffrey Rush) is portrayed unsympathetically, and almost every national or international agency whose name my friend heard in lock-up is at least referred to in passing.

But the truth is that Spielberg's "serious" filmmaking sweats righteousness; he makes black-and-white cases on obvious issues and pretends to force the viewer to face them.

In *Munich* you can feel him recruiting you to decency, but the film's moral terrain is uncertain and he's unwilling to take sides. His indignation, humanism, and heroic posturing ricochet through the picture without ever finding their target, while bright, morally weightless passages of entertainment flash by.

A smarter approach to this material would have been to make it fact rather than character-driven, but Spielberg's method is to coerce, not to illuminate, and all he manages in the film's near three hours — 164 minutes (I found the figure on RottenTomatoes.com) — is to suggest that, non-specifically, violence begets violence.

And in the interests of coercion he creates in *Munich* the ugliest passage of all of his films: Three of the Jewish assassins board a houseboat in Amsterdam where they kill a female assassin in revenge for a colleague's death, and Spielberg stages the murder so brutally that I was heartsick and filled with revulsion for the rest of the film. I wish to reiterate that the circumstances of this killing are fictional; in other words, Spielberg gave birth to this horror himself and inflicted it on his audience, and his talent is so virtuoso that the power of his images makes it feel like he's showing off.

I wanted to hit back, but the patient seemed a little irrational. What other word describes it? In *Munich*, Spielberg wants to entertain us — it's as though he can't stop himself — but then he slaps us as hard as he can. He does a lot of yelling in the dark. And the worst part is he's begging us to agree with him, but we can't make out what he's trying to say.



Turkeys of the screen

The Top 10 worst movies, according to three people who disagree.

JAKE'S LIST

10. *Disclosure* (1994) *Disclosure* is the blow I strike against all of Hollywood prostitute Michael Crichton's works; I might've chosen *Congo*, except that that film doesn't pretend to be anything more than what it is: non-stop horseshit in which Tim Curry, wielding a deadly accent, is mired. But *Disclosure* is worse than just horseshit — it's worse even than merely "pertinent." The fact is that *Disclosure* provides a vehicle for Hollywood's most loathsome actor — Demi Moore — and, in the male lead, Michael Douglas, a pouty-faced runner-up.

9. *Crash* (1996) Ex-*F5* critic Johnny Szlauderbach and I argued recently over whether or not David Cronenberg has a sense of humor. If so, where is it? Not in *A History of Violence* (which badly needed it), not in his arctic *Dead Ringers*, certainly not in this miserable shock effort. *Crash*'s dead-serious comportment renders it wildly unwatchable, as if someone had made *Andy Warhol's Frankenstein* without being in on the joke.

8. *Battlefield Earth* (2000) Place it next to *The Omega Code* and *The Omega Code* shines. Seen in the context of normal cinematic fare, *Battlefield Earth* leaves you groping for an explanation. What culture produced this? How? Who's to blame?

7. *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) Ice cold, indecent, and too obvious to be in any way deep, Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* excuses its own brutality with an addled moralizing that repulses me — more repulsive still when the picture begs our forgiveness for a murderer by its end.

6. *Barton Fink* (1991) I'm not a fan of the Coen brothers, and even if I had started out as one (I didn't get *Blood Simple*) the smugness of their "subversive" style and their ransacking of genres would have turned me off long ago. But *Barton Fink*, an inexplicable attack on playwright Clifford Odets, is worse by far: it means to lure you with its off-kilter humor, but it's a mean and self-congratulatory humor, and besides a shot at Faulkner (who could, aesthetically, take either of these little bitches), there's not a single thing going on.

5. *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) I propose a 15-minute prequel in which we see these salt-of-the-earth criminals actually committing crimes. Then those of us who have never raped anyone and who retain the legal right to vote can decide whether or not to "learn" from their homilies.

4. *As Good As It Gets* (1997) For me, bad movies are made worse when they sweep the Oscars. What others saw in this inflated TV program by a sitcom creator, I don't know. Me, I kept seeing Helen Hunt playing a bitch who exploits a one-dimensional retarded man, played by Jack Nicholson. And I want it to go on the record that seeing Brooks' credit at the film's beginning, I correctly predicted a suffering child.

3. *The Exorcist* (1973) Although no child ever suffered like this one. Watching 12-year-old Regan fuck herself with a crucifix, I wondered, *Am I learning? Or is this entertainment?* Thirty-two years later I still don't know.

2. *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) See above.

1. *Schindler's List* (1993) *The Killing Fields* (1984) is the other candidate for this top spot; what

the two movies have in common is their willingness to congratulate themselves and their audiences on being outraged at the unimaginable, real-life suffering of others. Genocide is bad; what's just as worrisome is that anyone needs a movie that explains only that and nothing else.

Experience *Weekend* at all costs

Originally published November 24, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)



>*SEE IT*

Title: *Weekend*

Rating: F5

Short review: This scathing 1968 satire pushed the envelope of film making in such a way that the plot — a French couple seem to casually descend into a hellish version of contemporary France filled with cannibal hippies — has little to do with the complete delight that exists within it.

W

Weekend, Jean-Luc Godard's masterpiece of the French new wave, is a forgotten film.

The subject of whipcord controversy in 1968, this scathing satire was at some point quietly retired into the Pantheon of "must-see" films — except that, in this case, no one much saw it.

New Yorker Films is taking steps to reverse this with their new DVD release of *Weekend*; disown your spouse and children, behave immorally, write capricious checks, but please, whatever else happens, don't miss this chance to accept the challenge *Weekend* is still dying to make.

What is it? Visionary, insane, and barbarously funny, *Weekend* tells the story of one couple's car trip from their apartment in Paris to the provincial home of the wife's mother, from whom they hope to borrow money.

The couple starts out in a 1968 landscape that's slightly exaggerated; as Pauline Kael wrote, the people are "more adulterous, more nakedly mercenary, touchier. They have weapons, and use them at the slightest provocation."

Not far from the city the pair encounters a traffic jam on the highway resulting from a bloody accident, and as they range further from the city, the horrors continue to mount until the couple — and the viewer — is buried to the neck in a specifically Godardian vision of hell.

Arriving at the mother's home, having lost their car on the corpse-strewn highway, the bickering couple is refused money; when they then kill the older woman, it seems like the normal, contemporary thing to do.

Headed back to Paris on foot, they're kidnapped by a marauding band of leftist, cannibal hippies.

The wife is seduced into their cause, whatever it may be, and is subsequently served her husband in a stew.

That serves as a synopsis of the plot, but the deeper joys of *Weekend* aren't possible to supply in words. The film contains a few of the most audacious and brilliant passages in my movie-going experience: a legendary tracking shot that, in one uninterrupted take, follows our couple's progress through the abovementioned traffic jam, passing by dozens of vehicles and considerable carnage, while car horns shriek on the soundtrack and violence simmers in every human interaction. Or an impossible scene in which a woman makes an extraordinary erotic confession to her therapist; she's so petulant and the scene is so nasty you tell yourself it can't be happening.

Except of course it is.

When *Weekend* was released, Godard was perhaps the most influential person at work in cinema; he was watched the world over because he was using the medium in brand-new ways, and the possibilities he opened up have influenced virtually everything since.

In *Weekend* Godard pushed the envelope in any way he could imagine, and the exuberance of his

technique, as well as his childlike belief in film as a vehicle for social change, is likely to leave you with a contact high. Because Godard was taking chances no one had ever taken before, some scenes inevitably fail, and these tend to go down in flames.

I showed *Weekend* in my previous capacity as film programmer for an arts center, and plenty of patrons walked, unwilling to endure what's ludicrous or offensive about it in order to bask in what makes it singular and so great. "Well, you challenged me," one friend said at the film's end, thus gracefully understating her bafflement at what amounts to one of cinema's true full-frontal assaults.

Risks like those Godard takes in *Weekend* are a thing of the past; in his hell-bound campaign against stagnation and cliché, he may have burned some of the terrain that lay before, as well as behind, him. *Weekend* can't be made today for the same reason that a young painter can't reinvent cubism: it's too late. We've absorbed the change. But if you've ever wondered how it was that film evolved from *National Velvet* to *Blue Velvet*, *Weekend* is a big part of the answer. Don't miss it this time around.



Polanski's *Oliver Twist* is a whole new creation

Originally published October 6, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)



OLIVER, WITH A TWIST: Roman Polanski's adaptation of the Charles Dickens classic is original, engrossing and absolutely Polanski-esque.

>SEE IT

Title: *Oliver Twist*

Rating: F5

Short review: One of the most perverse and enjoyable "family" films that I've seen in many years. Polanski takes what's queasy from Dickens and embellishes it with his own, wilder sensibility with the result that the film frightens, amuses in a weirdly indirect way, and remains engrossing scene for scene.



In the massive Arts and Letters archives of the personal little earth on which I live, Bernard Malamud's novel *The Natural* is short-listed for the coveted Great American Novel Award.

My dizzying love for it finds an exact correlation in my disdain for Robert Redford — was there a more transparent narcissist alive in the 1980s than Robert Redford? — whose vanity required that the ending of Malamud's great book be rewritten for Barry Levinson's tragic 1984 film adaptation. This was done in order that the character portrayed by the vainglorious, aging, lit-from-below Redford not be cast in an unfavorable light.

Was Redford's conceit justification enough for tampering with a masterpiece? Well fuck no, it wasn't.

Redford and Levinson took a wonderful novel and jammed it with cliches, diluted its characters, and stole its central message in order to tickle the ego of a declining star. *The Natural*, in its movie version, wasn't art, it was cosmetology.

In their new film adaptation of Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* director Roman Polanski and screenwriter Ronald Harwood have likewise taken liberties with their classic source material: Oliver's nine years in an orphanage are telescoped into what seems like a few weeks, his relationship to the Artful Dodger is downgraded from friendship to acquaintance, the character of Monks goes unexplained, the Brownlows and the Maylies have been merged into a single family, and, most unexpectedly, the eleventh-hour coincidences and exposition common to all of Dickens's most popular novels have been wholly dispatched.

In the case of Levinson's *The Natural* the autopsy revealed a film comprising watered-down Malamud and nothing else. An examination of *Oliver Twist*, on the other hand, shows an incidental likeness to Dickens amid a great, largely original work by Polanski. As he did much less successfully in 1972's *Macbeth*, Polanski has taken familiar source material and made it distinctly his own.

Polanski's *Oliver Twist* casts a dark, hypnotic spell, and it moves along at a faster clip than Dickens's 800-some page novel. On the smaller canvas Polanski creates, emphases are necessarily shifted; the situations Oliver finds himself in are more fluid and less permanent, so that, for instance, you may feel as though he's just moved in with Fagin and his crew of pickpockets when he's suddenly adopted by an upper-class family and whisked away.

The payoff for this compromise is the efficiency with which Polanski conveys the *nature* of these situations.

The film's first image, after the toile-like credits, is a dismal, rutted path lined with crows that leads, under overcast skies, to a distant, gray orphanage; once inside, the boys sit side by side on wooden benches unraveling rope all day before retiring, starving, to suspiciously coffin-like beds. (These pale, thin boys look more like concentration camp survivors than orphans, reminding one that Polanski himself lost family in the death camps of World War II.)

The boys are overseen by pompous, overfed caretakers (as in all of Polanski these supporting players are perfectly cast); the impression this sequence leaves is that it might have been the work of a talented, less stupidly ironic Tim Burton.

When at last Oliver arrives in London, the sets at first seem inadequate to the film's atmosphere; I couldn't help comparing them to Tony Richardson's harrowing shots of the same city in *Tom Jones*.

But a little patience was all that was required, and as Oliver slips further into the London underground, Polanski compensates with street scenes teeming with rats and brawls, muddy streets shot from above, and canals on whose surfaces oily puddles gleam.

The London Polanski creates feels as peopled and whole as the space in which a Tom Waits song plays out. And to provide contrast between the London of the rich and that of the poor, Polanski at one point goes so far as to quote Gustave Caillebotte's familiar painting of the city's bourgeoisie strolling the rain-wet streets beneath umbrellas.

We know that this London is there, but also that another, more dangerous city throbs just blocks

away, or just underneath.

But what makes *Oliver Twist* a great film is the action that Polanski places within these trappings. Oliver's first fight, with a jealous apprentice named Noah, is staged with real energy; it feels raw and vicious, and it's complemented by a later, balletic sequence in which Fagin and his crew demonstrate the art of pickpocketing with incredible grace and wicked legerdemain.

Polanski uses unexpected images, as he always does, to great effect; I'm thinking here of a black carriage pulled by black horses and ridden by perhaps a dozen people, all dressed in black, that appears before Oliver suddenly in the road. The show-stopper, though, is an extended, brutal sequence in which a midnight rendezvous on London Bridge leads step-by-step, with almost malevolent inevitability, to the horrific and cruel murder of a sympathetic character. The perpetrator, finding himself described on wanted posters as owning a large dog, later tries to lure the dog to its death, and the sequence ranks among the most dread-inducing in all of its director's oeuvre. I found myself wondering if this is cinema's best use of a dog.

I mentioned that the supporting performances in *Oliver Twist* are a wonder, but for acting the award goes to Ben Kingsley, whose Fagin is a multi-faceted wonder. When he first meets Oliver we see him playing it up for the children he oversees and winning over his new charge; later, when his part calls for cruelty, he loses his pleasant, just-kidding demeanor as simply as if he were taking off a mask.

Jamie Foreman, as the picture's true villain, Bill Sykes, at first seems to lack the necessary undercurrent of sadism, coming across as merely dim instead. But cornered, a new side of him emerges, and by the film's end he's menace and nothing else.

Alun Armstrong, in a bit part as a magistrate, is so winningly indifferent to the fates of those brought before him for sentencing that I can't go without mentioning him. He bears such a strong resemblance to Hugh Griffiths that I wondered again if an homage was being made to *Tom Jones*.

I have a complaint or two about *Oliver Twist*. Rachel Portman's score sounded, to me, like Aaron Copeland at times, and that had the effect of placing me on the wrong continent momentarily. (The sound editing, on the other hand, is first rate; incidental noises and animal sounds are mixed right up front and it deepens the movie's visual tapestry.) Nancy's relationship to Oliver is never emphasized, and the Artful Dodger's loyalties remain unreadable even when it becomes important to us to know whose side he's on.

But what I mostly saw in *Oliver Twist* is Roman Polanski working in peak form. Truthfully I wouldn't call what I saw "Dickens" exactly, but in reality there is an element of the queasy in Dickens, just as there is in Polanski, the difference being that Polanski's is the wilder sensibility.

In the film's closing shot, Oliver and his benefactor ride away into a beautiful dawn, Oliver's future happiness at last secured.

The catch is that they've just come from a visit to a character whose hanging happens to be scheduled for that same beautiful dawn. *That's* not Dickens. It's not David Lean, either, whose fine 1948 adaptation of *Oliver Twist* Dickens purists will prefer.

This perverse coda, in which a glorious daybreak inspires both hope and horror, could only be the work of one filmmaker that I can think of. It's my boy Polanski.



The Fair *almost* feels like the first time

Originally published September 22, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)



ALMA'S PRIDE: Linda Miller and her pig, Chester, took first prize in the Ladies Barrow Drive. Chester was competing against nearly 50 other hogs, and had won a couple of times before.

A

ctually, I've seen Foreigner before. I had forgotten all about it until I walked into the Grandstand at the Kansas State Fair last Friday night where their concert was already underway. The first time had been at the Kansas Coliseum on the *Double Vision* tour, although really it was their opening act, Bram Tchaikovsky, that I had gone to see.

But now here I was at Foreigner again, and I have to admit that within the context of the State Fair — with the band amped to the max, playing on a temporary stage out where the car races and the tractor pulls are held, and with a nearly full moon above them, the lights of the ferris wheel off to the left, and a thousand or more fans shrieking their lungs out in the bleacher-like

seating — I have to admit that under the circumstances it was a pretty good time.

Of the musicians on-stage I recognized Mick Jones and singer Lou Gramm, whom I thought to have left the band due to a brain tumor some time ago, and I later learned that the drummer was Jason Bonham, son of Led Zeppelin drummer John.

Mick actually said something about "the rockin' state of Kansas" and asked if there were any dirty Kansas girls in attendance before breaking into "Dirty White Boy"; the song brought a man seated a few feet down from me to his feet, and he sang along and danced throughout the rest of the show.

Huge monitors alternated images of the band with candid audience shots: a middle-aged couple swaying to "I Want to Know What Love Is" and, much more frequently, a sexy rock chick in a "Very Huggable" T-shirt. Highway patrolmen loitered disinterestedly on the dirt track on either side of the stage. A band member climbed some scaffolding along the temporary proscenium as the audience cheered.

The hits kept rolling out, ostensibly ending with "Jukebox Hero." The crowd roared for more, and before the encore Mick explained that the 25th anniversary of John Bonham's death was approaching; to help his son "work through it" the band did a Led Zeppelin cover before firing off another of their own.

Afterwards, in the men's room, I ran into the guy who had been rocking out so intensely from "Dirty White Boy" on. He told me that his name was John, too, and that he was 41. When I asked where he was from, he said Idaho. Surely he hadn't driven all this way just to see Foreigner?

He was a big fan, he explained.

He was talking into my handheld voice recorder as he said these things, sauntering over to a urinal mid-sentence so that I was more or less obliged to follow, and soon we were in violation of the unspoken rule that strangers don't conduct involved conversations at urinals.

To make the interview more awkward still, John introduced his 10-year-old son Terry, a few urinals over, and Terry leaned in front of the men between us to wave. I stood kind of behind John so as not to seem "weird."

And now John was waffling on the issue of his residency. "Now, I *do* live here in Hutchinson *now*," he said as though I had accused him. As for the concert, he said that he had enjoyed the Journey song Foreigner had done, except that they hadn't done a Journey song.

I said that I had thought "Dirty White Boy" sounded good, and John said, "That's when *I* went off."

A second encore hadn't seemed likely when I left my seat, and yet now the familiar strains of "Hot Blooded" could be heard thundering from the stage. John loved this song too, he said very matter-of-factly, and I used the opportunity to tell him that I'd let him get back to it.

"Don't you want some more material?" he asked. But I thought I was done.

YOU GIVE ME HOPE TO CARRY ON

I *thought* I was done, but as it turned out there was more music to be had at the Fair.

It used to be that the Beer Garden was your one choice if you wanted anything harder than cider, but walking past a deli, I heard a fragment of what had to be karaoke coming from an outside courtyard.

Investigating further, I found a drunken clientele watching with real intensity as a 40-something woman with a feathered, helmet-like hairdo rendered the Debby Boone hit "You Light Up My Life" into audio carnage.

Her demeanor was absolutely sincere, but her singing was atonal wailing such as you can't imagine. You just can't.

People watched as I tried to capture it on my recorder, but none of them seemed to want to make eye contact with me or react with one another. I realized that all of us — every person in the courtyard — would lose it if even one person indicated that he understood what was going on.

KEEP YOUR HANDS INSIDE THE CART

Back on the Midway, my friend Barbara pointed out that the house of mirrors was unfortunately called the Mardi Gras this year. This reminded her of a joke. Q: Where does President Bush stand on Roe v. Wade? A: He really doesn't give a shit how people leave New Orleans.

Since it was now way past dark, Barbara and I decided to ride the Demon's Lair, a \$2-per-person ride of the haunted house variety.

There was no line, and the ride operator, seeing me talk into a voice recorder, said something to us we didn't understand as our cart lurched in through the first door. He seemed excited, and, having seen *Funhouse*, we were apprehensive about what he said.

Inside, we came first to a brightly painted tunnel which I imagine was supposed to have been spinning, but wasn't. There were some masks stuck up on a wall, then our cart turned and went down a small hill where a red light shone on a box in which a scary head bobbed up. Another door took us outside onto a kind of patio for a few feet, then back inside where something in the darkness to my right didn't go off. Or maybe it was just storage? We next saw a mannequin that stood puking a continuous stream of fake vomit into a trash can, then another box in which a scary head, again lit in red, bobbed down.

When our cart banged into the exit door a second later, I checked my recorder. I had taped the entire ride; one minute and twenty-eight seconds had elapsed.

A better value was the Fireball, a \$4 ride that we shared with four excellent young women from

Wichita named Robyn, Dee, Jasmine, and Jiahda.

The Fireball seats maybe 20, and it spins in circles while swinging back and forth like a pendulum. At the top of its arc, the Fireball is swinging you pretty high in the sky, and if you put your legs out you get a nice freefall effect on both sides. The swirl of neon amid the wildly changing perspective is elating.

Robyn, Dee, Jasmine, and Jiahda were screaming their heads off, but then Barbara and I were too; you couldn't help it, and it was laughter that made you scream, not real fear. Afterwards I asked our new friends about the ride and about the way the floor drops out from under your feet just before it starts.

"Man, I was scared when the floor... "

"No! I was like, what was scary was when you're like we're gonna hit one of them boards... "

"But you're not! Mother goes *fast*... "

"When you go up? And you see the black sky? That was great. That shit was *scary*!"

The next ride was starting up on the Fireball, and my friend Jon, who had joined us, pointed out a stoned guy who was lying in the grass underneath where the Fireball swings out beyond its base when it gets going. From his point of view it must have looked like a giant, electric flower spinning huge in the sky overhead, and when it passed over him he laughed and gave it a two-finger rock salute.

Next door, however, on the Ring of Fire, another kind of experience was being had.

The Ring of Fire is a two-directional train inside a giant circular track; it goes up one side, then back and up the other, gaining ground until it makes the entire loop. Before it loops, though, there's a moment when the train hangs upside-down at the top of the loop.

Barbara heard someone on board yell, "Get us down!"

But all I knew was that I was seeing a string of vomit falling out of the suspended train and that it glistened in the neon on its way down. I heard it hit, the operator swore, and the ride ended pretty abruptly.

Everyone watched the riders deplane, trying to figure out who had gotten sick, and we were surprised when some of them lined up to ride again. But the operator waved them off.

Another guy showed up with a bottle of Formula 409 and some paper towels, and the Ring of Fire was thus closed. For "enhancements."

WHAT'S THAT SMELL?

Me, I've always had a strong stomach.

As a kid I made a steady diet of Pronto Pups, caramel apples, candied apples, saltwater taffy, large Cokes, cotton candy, gimmick candy (one year the thing was "dots," little buttons of sugar dried onto a ribbon of paper that were supposed to look like a read-out from a computer, computers then being mysterious, room-sized appliances that ran on vacuums and were attended by lab-coated scientists), and any other garbage that I, unchaperoned, chose to jam into my head.

Even then there were places, church-run usually, where you could get a decent meal, and now a lot of these have been brought together in one building, the same building where, in the '80s, two kind, very old women used to run a booth where incredibly leftist buttons and bumper stickers could be purchased. (It was they who explained to me that a pink triangle signified gay pride; they both admired the work Che had done, and I once bought a button from them reading, "Capitalism is Organized Crime." My guess is that their advanced age and grandmotherly demeanor were the only things standing between a torch-lit lynching and themselves.)

I visited this building this year for the purpose of acquiring some pie that I knew to be there, but otherwise I found that my eating habits haven't much changed.

What's offered to eat, on the other hand, has. This year I could have sampled alligator on a stick, deep-fried candy bars, or a hamburger prepared at a booth whose permanent sign reads **HAMBURGERS! DOLLAR DAYS! EVERYTHING JUST \$1!** An espresso cart offered pretty good iced coffee; when they closed for the night, I was a little dismayed to find that there's now not only a Starbucks in Hutchinson, but one at the Fair as well. There was an oxygen bar where one may have purchased scented air.

Barbara, Jon, and I did try Dippin' Dots Ice Cream, a confection that's been around for several years but that I never had a go at before. Sometimes called "nitro" ice cream, Dippin' Dots are BB-sized pellets that are poured into small, medium, or large cups and that come in the usual flavors: vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, banana split, etc. Putting a spoonful of Dippin' Dots into your mouth is at first like taking a mouthful of sleet or fine hail; they're crunchy and cold, and they make you think that they might get stuck to your tongue like a frozen flagpole. But then they turn creamy and their flavors emerge. I thought it was pretty good.

Is there anything on earth with a greater potential for humorlessness and sanctimony than a uniformed American cop?

Three stood outside the Dippin' Dots booth, visiting and laughing with one another, but when I approached them they suddenly turned professional, hard, and ice cold, a sequence exactly the same as that of the Dippin' Dots, only in reverse. I introduced myself, without my voice recorder, and asked if they had any funny or unusual stories about their jobs at the Fair they could tell me.

"We cannot comment on that, sir," the first one said.

It was a complete stonewall. I was surprised. "Nothing?" I asked.

"There's a public information officer in Topeka who would be happy to answer your questions," another said. "You can call up there during business hours."

Homeland Security? Secret Service? I wondered what public safety issues might arise were one of these police men to tell me that he'd seen a rooster get loose or that he'd won a pink feather boa for his wife.

There was a pause.

"Can you tell me what branch of law enforcement you represent?" I ventured. "Sheriff's office, or what?"

They conferred. "We're Highway Patrol," one revealed.

I was about to say something else when the first officer said, "Have a safe night." He meant that our conversation was done.

A CHAMPION PIG

At the petting zoo some 40 goats scrambled around a fenced area, waiting for their last meal of the day, which they knew to be coming soon.

The Midway was gradually emptying, and people patted the goats as they passed by going to their cars. The goats were adorable.

Eventually a young man with one of those western Kansas, farm-guy builds walked up holding a bale of hay in each hand and effortlessly threw them into the pen. Goat mayhem ensued.

"How do you win one of those?" I asked the guy, indicating the frantic goats. "I don't see the rules."

It was an experimental joke, and it looked bad for a minute. But then the guy smiled and shook his head. "I gotta feed the rest of these goats, dude," he said, and walked away.

Now it was very late by State Fair standards. People were leaving in droves and the nearly-full moon hung high overhead.

I ventured over to the Swine Barn, which was still lit. It appeared to be empty save for a woman who was attending to two hogs. She was Linda Miller from Alma, Kansas, and one of the hogs she was feeding was Chester, a purebred barrow or, in other words, a castrated boar.

Chester was pink, long, and noisy, with rather large ears and a classic curly tail, exactly the kind of hog you envision when you think of Dorothy falling into the pigpen in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Tomorrow, Linda explained, Chester would be competing in the Ladies Barrow Drive, where the

judge would be gauging his length, the amount of muscle and ham he exhibited, and whether or not he is "sound" — whether or not he limped.

Of course, the Ladies Barrow Drive featured only barrows who had been raised by women; trying to imagine it, I pictured a dog show set-up in which Linda would run grinning into an arena with Chester on a leash. I told Linda that and she said, "That's right. Except for the leash. We'll take him out in the ring and I'll have a little stick to control him with. There'll probably be 10 of us out there out there at a time."

Linda provided a ball park figure of 50 hogs that would be competing against Chester overall. How were his chances?

"I think pretty good," she said. "I won the Ladies Drive about two or three years in a row, but I got bumped last year."

It was then that I realized that in Linda and Chester I was talking to a pair of champions, and that this year was especially important to them. It was their chance for a comeback. I said so, but Linda, though pleased and obviously proud of Chester, demurred. It wasn't that big a deal.

I wished her and Chester good luck. They'd been at the Fair for more than a week, camping on the grounds with Linda's husband and teenaged children, something they'd been doing annually for more than 10 years. She said it was a blast, especially for her children, and I could imagine that it was.

Growing up in Hutchinson I used to dream of living at the Fair. My family only ever locked the doors during those 10 days in September because, it seemed to me then, once a year a small city became, provisionally, a much bigger one, one that, like New York, never really sleeps.

It still seems so to me today.

There are always swine and horses and rabbits to care for; rides need maintenance; Midway workers (or "carnies" as we used to call them) need a place to blow off the day's grit, heat, and tedium. People must walk the Fairgrounds at night. Someone must have to check the temperature in the cooler in which the butter sculpture resides. Someone must walk the dark canals of Ye Old Mill after hours. Somewhere in the campgrounds a rancher's daughter has to have slipped out to meet some Hutchinson boy.

I loved the Fair as a child, but my relationship to it became strained when I began to see it for what it is: tacky, dangerously conservative, usually overpriced. I got tired of being called a faggot and of being browbeaten by barkers who wanted me to throw away \$20 trying to win a giant blue dog I didn't have room for at home and had no wish to carry around. Tiahart's cheerful minions sickened me, and I bridled at the photos of fetuses in trash cans at "pro-life" booths manned by adults and their kids.

Today, though, I have to wonder if I was being fair. Yeah, the State Fair is tacky, but tacky can be beautiful: ask the stoner stretched out beneath the Fireball, or a Foreigner fan like John "from Idaho." It's undeniably conservative, but the people can be surprisingly compassionate as well: look how long my little old socialist ladies were tolerated, or consider Linda Miller from Alma,

who treated me very nicely despite an unintentionally wild appearance on my part that I wasn't fully aware of until I got home. And overpriced? This year I was hypnotized for free along with dozens of others, I rode a truly frightening Ye Old Mill at a cost of \$2, and I argued with Senator Pat Roberts' Communication Director about expanded FBI search powers without spending a dime. I marveled at car decals that said:

"Your [sic] not the brightest crayon in the box, are you?";

"Save a child. Shoot a drug dealer";

"Real trucks don't have spark plugs"; and

"Hell yes I'm drunk. What do you think I am, a stunt driver?"

And the best things about the State Fair you can't put a price to anyway. I'm thinking here of my conversation with Robyn, Dee, Jasmine, and Jiahda. I'm thinking of watching two highway patrolmen at the Foreigner concert who casually turned and stared at the giant monitors every time the sexy rock chick came on. I'm thinking of the smiling farm guy who decided to get my joke about the goats he was feeding. The moon was nearly full.

And as I was writing those last words, a call came in from the Kansas State Fair Public Relations Director in response to a query I made earlier today. It seems that congratulations are in order to Linda Miller and her hog Chester, who did indeed take the top prize in the Ladies Barrow Drive last Saturday. Welcome back! I hope that all of Alma is proud.



The State Fair changes while it stays the same

Originally published September 15, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)



WHO'S THE OLD TIMER?: Jake Euker inspects his sexy new leather bracelet under threat of personal extinction.

A

t the Kansas State Fair on Saturday I watched as my nephew Sam (16) and my niece Maddie (14) were strapped into a Midway attraction called the Slingshot.

A sign in front of the Slingshot told me that the structure supporting the cage into which Sam and Maddie were being strapped is 142 feet high and that the cage itself is propelled to a height of 200 feet on rubber cords once released from the mechanism holding it to the ground. I learned that Sam and Maddie would be traveling at a speed of 100 mph and sustaining six Gs of gravitational force. If Sam or Maddie suffered from back, neck, or heart problems, the sign informed me, they would be doing well not to ride the Slingshot at all. The Slingshot costs \$25 per person per ride.

I grew up in Hutchinson until the age of 13 and, as such, the State Fair is an inextricable part of my childhood. Like Sam and Maddie, what excited me most about the Fair was the rides.

This was in the late '60s and early '70s, and in those days there were freak shows, too, although Flipper Boy, the Bearded Lady, and the Two-Headed Calf — all of whom I saw — were of somewhat less interest to me than the Matterhorn, the Cyclone, and so on. There were also peep shows featuring women in pasties, and although my friends and I longed to go into one of these, we didn't see a way an 8-year-old could obtain a ticket, no matter what.

Some of the rides I patronized as a child are still there: I saw the Yo-Yo, the Matterhorn (now called the Silver Streak), and the redoubtable Ye Old Mill, open for business just as it has been since 1913. But of course new rides outnumber those I remember and, like the Slingshot, they tend to be closer to what today's kids call "extreme."

And \$25 was about what I spent in two days at the Fair as a child. After Sam and Maddie were launched in the Slingshot, on the other hand, about 90 seconds passed before they were back on solid ground. They loved it, but I wasn't about to climb aboard and I told my sister Valerie so.

"I don't know why not," she answered. "Those things *we* rode were about a jillion times more dangerous."

Valerie then recalled for me the Mouse Trap. As an adult I now understand that probably no agency ever inspected the Mouse Trap and that it would likely be impounded on sight by safety officers today.

But in 1969 we lined up in front of it, waving tickets for our chance to die.

The Mouse Trap was a roller coaster with the gimmick that most of its turns were right angles. After a notoriously slack chain dragged your red, wheeled cart to the top tier, you picked up speed on slopes only to encounter ever more horrific right-angled turns.

Rumors of Mouse Trap-related deaths abounded, and I believe that more than one cart toppled off the topmost track right there in Hutchinson. The authorities even went to the unprecedented length of closing it down for a time.

But in my memory it was a lot of fun, though even back then I saw it as being a matter of how fully-loaded your cart was whether or not you'd live to see the end.

Next, the four of us boarded the Ferris Wheel and Valerie pointed out that we had thought that *that* was dangerous too. As we began our ascent, she pointed out the R-shaped pins that appear everywhere and that seem to hold the whole thing together. She reminded me that it had been our firmly-held belief that the failure of just one of these pins would bring the entire Ferris Wheel down, and that this fear was compounded by the well-known fact that inmates from Hutchinson's Men's Reformatory put the rides together as part of their public service.

The collapse of the Ferris Wheel, we then believed, was just a matter of time.

MIDWAY MADNESS

When I was at the University of Kansas and needed money I had the great idea that I should open a booth at the Fair with a sign reading, "Your Name Written in Cursive. \$2." I'd have celebrity examples, such as Willie Nelson, on display.

But if you want to get fleeced, you don't need to wait for me.

On the Midway this year you can attempt to ride a bicycle in which the handlebars steer in the opposite direction from that in which they're pointed; make it a short distance and you win a giant, stuffed Spongebob Squarepants. There's the rope ladder you can fail to climb, the rubberized buckets you can fail to be able to toss a ball into from a short distance, the twisting pieces of metal you can fail to pass a hoop over without touching the hoop to the metal. One

booth advertised Machine Gun Fun (it had a HELP WANTED sign posted) and in another you won a prize for shooting a picture of a dog.

The ancient skill cranes are still in place, and they're always busy despite the tawdriness of the prizes: Zippo casings reading "Bitch," "Route 66," or "Lust," or depicting marijuana leaves, rebel flags, the Red Dog logo, or mushrooms; superballs; hideous acrylic bunny and teddy bear knick-knacks; and peace sign medallions you'd swear have been in there for 30 years.

But in the Grandstand there are more adult prizes to be had, and these you pay for outright instead of spending a fortune to "win" them.

You can buy America's finest telescoping flagpole, a Branson vacation, a poster bearing a poem revealing the meaning of your first name ("Jake" read, "Sensitive to problems / Incredible range / A supplanter by nature / Welcome the change."), the Amazing Rubber Broom, keeshond t-shirts, "Parking for Rebels Only" signs, and Bondwell, the New Generation in Glues. Just outside the Grandstand, car and T-shirt decals are for sale that read:

"Tickle this, Elmo";

"My other toy has tits";

"At 200 MPH you have no friends";

"Keep honkin' buddy. I'm reloading";

"If it moves pass it";

"I'm not speeding, I'm qualifying"; and

"Cowgirls need more than an 8 second ride"

YOU ARE FEELING SLEEPY

In State Fairs past I've seen Tammy Wynette, Johnny Cash, June Carter Cash, and Loretta Lynn in the Grandstand. I've watched as then-Senator Bob Dole was nearly booed from the Farm Bureau Arena stage for calling his opponent, Dr. Bill Roy, an abortionist during a debate. I've been assisted in sneaking into the Fair without paying by the firemen who are stationed at one of its corners. I've bought a chameleon on a string that, pinned to your shirt, turned your shirt's color. I've seen my underage brother Steve evacuate the Beer Garden puking and then heard him tell Mom and Dad it was food poisoning the next day.

One thing I'd never done before is get hypnotized.

Ron Diamond, a 40-something, balding man with a friendly demeanor, was the hypnotist who, this year, took me and 29 other volunteers under before a crowd of maybe 200.

I didn't think it would work, but then Ron started to count to 10 and, although our instructions

were to keep our eyes open, I closed mine around eight and have only partial memories of what came next: I remember falling forward, I remember being surprised at one point to find a young man's head resting against my leg, Ron turned a corner in front of me and I remember that, and finally I remember being told that my best friend was in a movie I was watching. I looked for a friend — for Brad or Freedy or Johnny — but what I became aware of instead was a sea of faces watching me.

It was then that I came out of hypnosis.

Others, including my niece and nephew, stayed hypnotized longer, and I watched them dance and react to stuff that wasn't there and laugh as they ate jelly beans that they had been told were "funny" jelly beans.

Later I learned that I myself had played with an imaginary ball or something that was being passed around, although my waking self would swear this isn't true.

One thing my niece and nephew and I definitely noticed was that the hypnosis left us feeling sluggish but great, even euphoric, for an hour or two afterward. I figure that that's when I bought the leather bracelet on which the word SEXY was spelled out in chrome letters.

BASED ON SCIENCE

If you don't believe I was actually hypnotized, you're never going to believe what 42-year-old operator Bob English had to say about the Electrograph 2410, a machine that, for a very reasonable fee, evaluates your personality based on your signature.

Bob, who travels all year with the Electrograph, defined the components for me: there are two units with a subunit in the middle, this subunit being the Electrograph's main processor. The top panel of the processor is covered with small lights that blink in irregular patterns, while the bottom half boasts an impressive array of meters measuring voltage and other things I couldn't understand. There are also two reel-to-reel tape decks, although I never saw these move.

To evaluate a patron's personality, a signed card is fed into the Electrograph where it is scanned in a way that Bob said was "almost the opposite of a regular scanner. This scanner shines light *through* the paper and looks for the black parts."

Within minutes a form is dispensed that reveals the patron's personality traits on a range of factors from romantic inclination to patience to creativity. The results, in my case, tended to be flattering.

"It's not going to point out that you're unemployable," Bob said.

I mentioned to Bob that the Electrograph had been at the Fair for as long as I could remember, but that it used to seem much larger to me.

"It was built in 1962," Bob explained. "A lot of people were working on similar concepts, and

this is the only one that really came through."

The problem is that the Electrograph is one of a kind. Because of this, parts can't be acquired, and as the machine has aged its operators have had to cannibalize it for repairs. My memory turned out to be accurate; the Electrograph once was some 14 units wide.

"Sooner or later," Bob said, "they'll all be gone."

The million-dollar question, of course, is whether or not Bob believes that the Electrograph can truly gauge people's personality traits. I asked.

"It has the accuracy of a knife-thrower," he answered. "These other things —" he pointed to signs promising that the Electrograph would provide horoscopes and lucky numbers as well — "those things were just added for people who want to believe in hocus-pocus. The Electrograph is based on science. We're required to *say* that it's for entertainment only, but that's only because no one can figure out how it works."

A woman named Marsha from Hays approached the Electrograph then, and she signed her card and Bob ran it through the machine and gave her her results.

As she looked them over I asked her how much faith she put in them. She paused for quite a while.

"Kind of maybe 50/50," she said at last. "I don't read the horoscope or anything. This is just something you do at the Fair. For me it's just kind of fun."



***Brothers Grimm* bursts with magic**

Originally published September 1, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)



OLD WORLD FLAVOR: *The Brothers Grimm* has all the ornate business you would expect from director Terry Gilliam, who's made a film career of delightfully twisting our take on lore.

>*SEE IT*

Title: *The Brothers Grimm*

Rating: F4

Short review: Director Gilliam infuses *The Brothers Grimm* with a creepy, fairy-tale atmosphere, and his frames are frantic with activity. There's too much of it, but why complain when most new releases offer us so little? Jonathan Pryce and Peter Stormare are hilarious in supporting roles, and Heath Ledger is surprisingly animated and engaging.



DIRTY FROG: As you might expect from a movie directed from a member of Monty Python, *The Brothers Grimm* is often very funny, such as the outrageously sexual behavior of the toad they have to kiss.

T

erry Gilliam's *The Brothers Grimm* is so full of good ideas and inspired imagery that you struggle to take it all in.

In comparison to all the witless horror and adventure films that have found their way to the screen in the past several years it's a revelation; it's so busy and so magical at times that it seems to come from another, parallel medium. *The Brothers Grimm* isn't great, but watching it is a relief. It makes you wonder why other directors don't bother using their imaginations.

The story is a twist on what you might expect: Will and Jake Grimm (Matt Damon and Heath Ledger, respectively) are a pair of sham miracle workers who travel around 19th-century, French-occupied Germany exorcising small towns of the trolls and witches that their associates have created in advance for that very purpose. They're well paid for this and they're regional celebrities as well, but Jake is increasingly sickened by their con. He would like to take himself more seriously, and he records their adventures in flowery prose towards that end.

Enter Delatombe (played in a brilliantly off-handed way by Jonathan Pryce), a ranking member of the French occupation who knows of a real haunting that's threatening the peace in the town of Marbaden and its neighboring woods. Delatombe dispatches the Grimms, along with the Italian Cavaldi (a really hilarious Peter Stormare) to put an end to the devilry. Should they fail, Delatombe will execute the Grimms and their associates for their previous chicanery. Once arrived in Marbaden, the brothers seek the help of a cursed tracker (Lena Headey) who leads them to an enchanted tower in which a genuine witch resides. This witch has already made victims of 11 local girls (Little Red Riding Hood and Gretel, whose stories Jake will later use in his tales, among them) and it becomes the job of the Grimms, the tracker Angelika, and Cavaldi to prevent her from completing an evil spell by taking a 12th.

The fact that *The Brothers Grimm* is saddled with too much plot and too many characters is

almost beside the point; Gilliam's overkill — his glut of detail, atmosphere, and comic asides — is what sustains the film anyway, so that an excess of narrative seems nearly inevitable.

Gilliam includes everything that amuses him, just as he did in *Time Bandits*, *Brazil*, and *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, and his frames are frantic with activity.

In the Marbaden Woods insects swarm menacingly, trees move about on their roots, and wolves transform into humans, all of this likely taking place as a character delivers his lines. I thought of the swirling, crammed atmosphere of Ridley Scott's ridiculous *Legend* initially, but the mania of *The Brothers Grimm* has an Old World flavor to it that's closer to Polanski's *The Fearless Vampire Killers* or the works of Emir Kusturica. (Goran Bregovic, Kusturica's wild-man composer of choice, was initially considered for the film, but it's the tamer music of Dario Marianelli that we hear in the final cut.)

Newton Thomas Sigel's cinematography both adds and detracts: it's strangely blanched yet often too dark, but its movement has a surprising, lyric liquidity to it in the forest scenes.

As you would expect from Gilliam (who was a member of Monty Python's Flying Circus), *The Brothers Grimm* is often very funny; I'm still laughing at the outrageously sexual behavior of a toad Will is obliged to lick, and there's a good bit in which he praises a village boy as "strapping," only to learn from the child's father that she's a girl.

And besides Pryce and Stormare, there's a surprisingly amusing performance from Heath Ledger, who portrays drunkenness winningly and who gets a considerable number of laughs just by talking with his hands.

But it's the creepy, fairy-tale quality that Gilliam brings to *The Brothers Grimm* that I'll remember most fondly; even his small scenes, such as the early appearance of a floating witch whose gown billows around her like a school of jellyfish, put the earnest, labored efforts of most fantasy directors to shame.

You may wish that Gilliam had pared his movie down a little or that he had used his magic more sparingly. But when so many new releases offer us so little, it seems a little daffy to complain that *The Brothers Grimm* gives us too much.



Opinion line

A parody

Originally published August 11, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)

N

ote: This column is written as a parody of the Wichita Eagle's Opinion Line. The author doesn't actually believe these things. If you are looking for actual bigotry, misogyny, homophobia, Christian intolerance, or catastrophic stupidity, check the Eagle.

■ ■ ■

I don't always agree with her opinions, but I do admire the way Margie Phelps carries herself. She's ladylike and she dresses attractively, too.

■ ■ ■

It's too bad about the war, but I will say that I enjoy all the yellow ribbon stickers. They're festive.

■ ■ ■

Soldiers get vacations too, you arrogant dumbass liberals. They're called "leave." Now get off the goddamn president's back.

■ ■ ■

If I owned a ranch in Texas I know I'd want to check in on it every once in a while. So many little things can go wrong, and then Texas is full of the wetbacks now, too.

■ ■ ■

I'm a shift manager at Taco John and these teachers make almost as much as I do. What's their problem?

■ ■ ■

I'll be 17 this month and I can't read a single word of English. I don't think our teachers deserve a raise.

■ ■ ■

Any time I open the paper I read about some jezebel schoolteacher screwing her kids. They must

want the extra money for abortions.

■ ■ ■

If it's not the greedy Boeing workers, it's the greedy teachers. I hoed potatoes for two dollars a day for forty years, and except for my left eye, three fingers on my left hand, and the use of my left arm, I've got everything a man could need. Shame on you all.

■ ■ ■

To the puppy torturer: If you make it to heaven, I hope Jesus beats the living daylights out of you.

■ ■ ■

The way I was raised it's a sin to torture something you don't intend to eat. It's getting pretty scary out there nowadays.

■ ■ ■

At least those poor puppies lived long enough to get set fire to. The unborn fetuses at the aboritoriums don't even get that chance.

■ ■ ■

Susan Peters needs to clean up her act and stop dressing so provocatively.

■ ■ ■

I'm a normal man with normal needs, and I haven't so much as touched a lady with a damn stick in over two years. I think I ought to be able to get one of those handicapped stickers, but the bigwigs down at City Hall keep telling me no.



The Island is long, empty explosions

Originally published July 28, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)



USE THE FORCE, LOGAN: Ewan McGregor and Scarlett Johansson play a pair of perfect people who discover that the world is not what they thought it is and set out for freedom, blowing up a lot of things along the way.

>SEE IT

Title: *The Island*

Rating: F2

Short review: Director Bay films action sequences in a kind of rapture of destruction, and his skill at this, combined with the munificence of his budget, make these long action scenes hard to ignore. But how much can you take? Clocking in at two-and-a-half hours, *The Island* is over long before the director finds out, and a rich premise is casually trashed along with most of Southern California.



If you want to build a life around your intense dislike for the works of director Michael Bay, I'm not going to try to stop you. You can dislike him for his single-mindedness or for his self-indulgence or for the way these two qualities pay off for him at the boxoffice.

But one thing you can't say is that he doesn't know how to direct an action sequence. Filming a big set piece like the one that centers his new film *The Island*, in which a pair of innocent fugitives (Ewan McGregor and Scarlett Johansson) spend something like 40 minutes of screen time eluding an elite bounty hunter (Djimon Hounsou) and his armed-to-the-teeth band of assassins, Bay goes into a kind of rapture that you can read on the screen.

Helicopters burst like fireworks in the sky, cars and semis are tossed around like toys, buildings

are driven through by flying motorcycles in explosions of glass and THX-enhanced thunder, bystanders are wiped out by the dozens, and all the while you can feel Bay's triumphant assurance.

Bay isn't interested in the niceties of plausibility, character, economy of narrative; he knows that if he makes a gesture toward providing these things the audience will accept it. What interests him is the kind of tightly-controlled, show-offy mayhem that is the centerpiece of his movies, and he has an unerring, adolescent sense of how to get this mayhem done.

You would think that his movies could be accepted on these terms, but it isn't so simple as that, and those who can't stand his films have a reason not to.

In *The Island*, McGregor and Johansson play a pair of sort-of-lovers who inhabit a mysterious facility where their needs are met with regimented routine; they and a few hundred like them are told what to eat and when to eat it, when and how much to exercise, what to think, and so on.

There's a central mystery to their existence and although it's cleared up about halfway through — cleared up so that the plot no longer interferes with the action — it's a thought-provoking premise. I won't reveal it, except to say that it shares a theme with Kazuo Ishiguro's recent novel *Keep Me With You*; Ishiguro, who wrote *The Unconsoled* and *The Remains of the Day*, approaches the material at a depth that Bay, who directed *Armageddon* and *The Rock*, never approaches, and part of the resentment you might feel at *The Island* has to do with the fact that a morally complex issue has been treated as though it were *Con Air*.

But the film's outstanding problem is that Bay's enormous success (he's often teamed with producer Jerry Bruckheimer, an unholy alliance if ever there were one) has placed him beyond the realm of strictures about budget and moderation.

Watching *The Island* you can, as a friend said, smell the budget: whole soundstages go up in flame after an initial appearance, built to be destroyed, and the cost of the cars totaled out in high-speed collisions with giant iron dumbbells would alone be enough, I would think, to fund the Iranian film industry for several years.

I was conscious of the fact that McGregor and Johansson often *ran past* destruction — background demolition — the cost for which likely equaled the entire budget of *The Blair Witch Project*. It's profligacy.

What's far worse, though, is that it's ungoverned. *The Island* clocks in at two-and-a-half hours, and I personally spent much of that time choosing which scenes might have been left in their entirety, without affecting the plot in any way, on the cutting room floor. I imagine that those of you who have seen the film will agree that you could have lived without the opening dream sequence, a surgery and subsequent pursuit, the birth of a fetus-person, the characters played by Honsou and Steve Buscemi, and the last quarter of the film.

Limit *The Island* to its central set piece and enough plot to get it there and you might have had an enjoyable film, although it's worth noting too that Steven Spielberg or even the Wachowski brothers — when they put their mind to it — can out-Bay Michael Bay any day they choose. And

Brian De Palma, in a film like *Femme Fatale*, puts him to absolute shame.

McGregor and Johansson are deliberately scripted as dimwits; they're charming, but both seem to intuit that they needn't call on their full reserves as actors to provide *The Island* with all it needs.

I'm not about to start talking about Hounsou or Buscemi, because why?

Sean Bean as the evil Dr. Merrick, is a caricature: he's the kind of villain whose villainy includes the precise over-enunciation of words, as though the ability to express oneself clearly is inextricably linked to a rotten soul. One of his lines was given so that the concluding "that" was pronounced, in close-up, as *thatuh*, and I found myself laughing in the theater.

The film looks nice — how could it not? — and Bay even exhibits a kind of shorthand in some of his action sequences — we skip, for instance, the opening of a hard-to-open door and rejoin our heroes afterward — that shows some maturity and finesse. Why this good judgment was suspended elsewhere — say in a men's room scene whose one joke is delivered several times — remains a mystery.

And meanwhile *The Island* rakes it in at the box office to the consternation of Michael Bay's critics and those audience members who worry about Hollywood's event-driven production schedules. (And even those who love it are likely to be aware that it's absurdly overlong.) Finally that's the most aggravating thing about both the director in general and his *Island* in particular: his movie is working, just like he knew it would.



***Chocolate Factory* is sickening eye candy**

Originally published July 21, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)



CRUEL AND UNUSUAL: Director Tim Burton's dysfunctional art direction (not direction) creates Johnny Depp's Willey Wonka: a malevolent, artificial freak who lays traps for children.

>*SEE IT*

Title: *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*

Rating: F1

Short review: It has all the warmth of *A Clockwork Orange*. Director Tim Burton pours all his efforts into the film's candy-bright, industrial Gothic look, and the film falls apart on every level. It's tedious at best and, in the presence of Depp's Willie Wonka, frighteningly detached.



ONE DOWN, THREE TO GO: Perhaps the largest failing of Burton's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is that he put all his effort into the visuals and reduced the plot to a systematic elimination of bad children.

T

im Burton's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* has all the warmth of *A Clockwork Orange*.

There was already an element of the sinister in Roald Dahl's novel, and the 1971 film version only barely managed to balance the magical with the macabre. Now Burton's film shoulders aside any potential screen magic, offering cold fantasy in its place. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is never human or lighthearted; it conveys detachment and hostility instead.

The story is that of the poor title child who, along with four others, wins a tour of Willie Wonka's mysterious candy factory. Once inside, the children succumb to temptations and bad manners one by one until only Charlie is left; he then learns that his host intends to make a gift of his entire candy empire to him.

Like the book, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is cheerfully judgmental about the children who are eliminated — one is fat, another spoiled, and so on — but in the end Willie Wonka is revealed to have a human side that responds to the essential goodness and selflessness in Charlie. The problem with Burton's film is that, in Willie Wonka, there's nothing human there.

Tim Burton's cinema is a cinema of dysfunction. It started with *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* and continued on through *Beetlejuice*, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Edward Scissorhands*, and so on. But in Willie Wonka, Burton has created his most coldly dysfunctional outcast yet. (Screenwriter John August even adds a back story about Willie's candy-hating, dentist father to supply a root cause.)

As he's played by Johnny Depp, Willie is a malevolent, artificial freak who appears to have laid traps for the children who are done away with rather than allowing them to succumb to their own weaknesses. Depp has bright blue contact lenses and air-brushed skin — most of the actors, in fact, have the uncanny "captured performance" look of Robert Zemeckis's *Polar Express* — and his cheerless grin recalls the scary Bob character in those faux-50s erectile dysfunction commercials that play all day on cable TV.

Depp can be an imaginative actor, but his Willie Wonka never gels into anything; he's like a frightening puppet animated by machines.

As for Burton, his decisions as a director seem to have been limited to art direction. One look at the concept he's developed for *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* would have shown that it couldn't work: his central character isn't there, the jokes don't connect (many are embarrassingly juvenile), and the plot is reduced to the systematic elimination of distasteful children.

All Burton's efforts are poured into maintaining his now-familiar candy-bright, industrial Gothic look, which was already tired a few movies back; the interior of the chocolate factory is like a three-dimensional Kenny Scharf painting from the early '80s. (Likewise tired is Danny Elfman's redundant score.) The final effect is one of arctic cold and tedium.

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory has a few — a very few — things to recommend it.

There's at least one good performance (by Missi Pyle as Violet Beauregard's horrible mother) although even this is caricature. And a couple of images stick with you, particularly that of an Oompa-loompa reclining cross-legged in a futuristic, white plastic chair. (The sequence in which this appears is an homage to *2001* and the image is borrowed from Stanley Kubrick, although I can't recall where.)

But ultimately *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is, on every level, a failure. Like the factory itself, Burton's film is all candy. It sickens you long before you get to the end.



Opinion line

A parody

Originally published July 14, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)

N

ote: This column is written as a parody of the Wichita Eagle's Opinion Line. The author doesn't actually believe these things. If you are looking for actual bigotry, misogyny, homophobia, Christian intolerance, or catastrophic stupidity, check the Eagle.

■ ■ ■

Each and every morning I thank the good lord that I'm lucky enough to live in a death penalty state.

■ ■ ■

What's the use of having a death penalty if we can't ever use it? Maybe we ought to hang a couple of judges just to get back in the swing of it.

■ ■ ■

Me personally, the way things are going, I wouldn't get within 200 yards of a high school without my loaded gun.

■ ■ ■

I think they should make the whores registered or legal or something. That way doctors could overlook the whole process and maybe I wouldn't wind up with the clap all the time. My wife's sick of it too.

■ ■ ■

Whenever the weather gets hot, here come the boobs, just like always. Everywhere I look some girl has her boobs waving around, and their ass cracks, too. Have some dignity.

■ ■ ■

Last week I sounded out one of your Easy Reader articles and just what did I learn? I learned that there's a lady serving on the Supreme Court, that's what. Where is this country headed?

■ ■ ■

Goodbye, Sandra Day O'Connor, you flag-burning, baby-killing, switch-hitting Jezebel. Let's get some Americans on that court.

■ ■ ■

If people learned to express themselves constructively, we wouldn't have any more BTKs. I express myself through my beautiful poetry whereas another might choose flowers or ice skating or handicrafts. Wake up that creative you.

■ ■ ■

I went to a so-called art show and it was like some psycho had chucked up all over the walls. I guess I'm just not sophisticated enough to understand.

■ ■ ■

Let's just cut to the chase and fill up Exploration Place with Radio Shacks, a Fantastic Sam's, and some kiosks full of garbage right now.

■ ■ ■

Seat belts crease my outfits and make me have to pee.



War of the Worlds an amazing loss

Originally published July 14, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)



A FREAKY ALIEN AND A LITTLE GIRL: Dakota Fanning, 11, puts in another great performance and Tom Cruise gets the job done, but the shocker is that director Steven Spielberg's storytelling falls down in the third act.

>*SEE IT*

What: *War of the Worlds*

Rating: F2

Short review: The first two-thirds are a joyride, but what feels at first like vintage Spielberg sputters out into preposterousness and tedium. Despite all that recommends it — including another strong performance from 11-year-old Dakota Fanning — a tragic narrative decision by Spielberg brings the whole thing crashing down.

T

he first hour or so of Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* is full of little felicities. The picture has barely started before the end of the world gets underway, heralded by lightning storms, the emergence, from underground, of alien death machines, and the obliteration of what I took to be Brooklyn or Queens; and watching it I was reminded of what made Spielberg such a great director in his early films.

I remember this guy, I thought as I watched the impossible occurring amid the day-to-day, feeling the familiar incredulity I experienced at his films in the '70s. I remembered for the first time in many years Spielberg's gift for depicting vastness, his unerring sense of narrative, the genuine, deeply-felt suspense his pictures once generated.

Specifically, the first half of *War of the World* resembles — stylistically if not thematically — Spielberg's great *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. When swirling, screen-filling clouds amass, filmed as a backdrop to an enormous expanse of bridge that dwindles before them, and signaling the first onslaught of some of really malevolent aliens, I thought of the sheer spectacle of spaceships filling the sky in the 1977 film, and I was reminded of it again as the alien's war machines first violently emerge from chasms in the streets and then tower over the cityscape which they then set about to destroy.

These first moments, and much of what follows, are filled with the kind of grace notes and unsettling touches that adorned *Close Encounters*.

When the lightning storm occurs, for instance, Spielberg renders it more frightening by showing us only his characters' increasingly uneasy reactions to the storm rather than the storm itself. He uses the image of an SUV flying through the air, spat from a canyon that opens beneath like a tossed paper cup, as a disturbing gauge of scale: the aliens' strength, it says, is exponentially greater than that of the fragile human world we know. And, in the film's creepiest moment, the guardrails close at a train crossing as a flaming, runaway train speeds through it, chillingly and economically conveying that the horrors we're seeing are occurring everywhere.

This is Spielberg doing what he does best: entertaining. Material like this is what made his a household name.

But then two-thirds into the film a different kind of disaster occurs, one that's aesthetic and not at all intentional.

Spielberg, regardless of whatever else you might think of him, has always been a master storyteller; in his sermon films, such as *The Color Purple*, his proficiency at handling narrative actually becomes a kind of liability. Yet in *War of the Worlds* he makes a tragic decision about the trajectory of the plot — our hero and his daughter take refuge in the basement of a stranger's home, where a conflict develops, and the film sputters out underground with them — that has the effect not only of shutting down the action but actually canceling out a lot of the fun we were having before.

This is more than a goofy miscalculation: it's extraordinary and ruinous to the extent that I can't conjure an example of a similarly enjoyable movie being beheaded so efficiently. All the more surprising that it comes from Spielberg; I half expected to learn that he had died during shooting and Peter Segal had been sent in to finish the job.

I've been struggling to come to terms with Spielberg over the course of his past few movies — in that period in which he came down from the altar, where he had served as the country's self-appointed conscience, and got back to entertaining, rather than teaching, us — but the death on-screen of *War of the Worlds* is another complication to be considered alongside the junkiness of his *Jurassic Park* pictures, the scary emotional void at the center of *A.I.*, the clichés and ultimate arbitrariness of *Minority Report*.

There are problems with the first part of *War of the Worlds* — our hero is hard to like and is played by Tom Cruise, for instance, and the screenplay (by Josh Friedman and David Koepp) is jammed with extraneous material and requires a very diligent suspension of disbelief — but watching it I was pleased to find that I was having the kind of good time that only Spielberg once provided.

For the sake of brevity I'm not touching on a lot of things that I might otherwise. (A partial list would include 11-year-old Dakota Fanning's strong performance and the slovenliness of Tim Robbins's by contrast, the beautiful sunset timbre of Janusz Kaminski's cinematography, and Spielberg's evolving depiction of childhood from an enchanted world of magical possibilities to the scene of uninterrupted horror.)

What I do want to register is my chagrin and surprise at what really defeats this picture. In the film itself the aliens are killed by microbes in our air, a possibility that hasn't occurred to anyone. Similarly, I never would have guessed that it was Spielberg's instincts as a *storyteller* that were going to bring this giant down.



***Longest Yard* has confused issues**

Originally published June 23, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)



CAN'T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG?: Why is it that Hollywood insists that all conflicts can be resolved by a wisecracking white guy (with a black sidekick)?



AREN'T THEY ALL 36 INCHES?: Yea! Another uncomfortable gay joke in the movie about prison and football! Sigh...

Y

ou don't have to be fanatical about political correctness to wonder what's going on in Peter Segal's remake of the 1974 prison football film *The Longest Yard*. I wouldn't say that the film is homophobic so much as that it's *obsessed* with homosexuality; the straight friend I attended it

with noticed it, too.

You begin to wonder if our culture has become so preoccupied with *Will and Grace* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* that the fascination has filtered down even into our football movies.

The film itself can't seem to settle on an attitude toward gays: in one character suspected homosexuality might be a cause for antipathy while in another it's a charming quirk. (One inmate offers this prayer: "Jesus Christ, if you help me out with this one I promise to quit cheating on my wife with black guys.")

Maybe in this way *The Longest Yard* reflects the ambivalence of its young, straight, male target audience. It struggles with its feelings toward gay men scene by scene. And it never lets up.

I don't recall the issue arising in the 1974 film, but then I can't claim to have re-watched it a lot either. (The occasion of a remake has caused a lot of talk about the "classic" original, as though remaking a film somehow canonizes it; reasoning like that puts *Freaky Friday* in the pantheon two times over.)

What the two *Longest Yards* do share is a plot in which a pro football player (Adam Sandler in the case of the new picture) runs afoul of the law, winding up in prison; there he assembles a team of inmates for a climactic game played against the prison guards.

Who to root for? The answer of course is the inmates, but as with the barrage of gay jokes, the issue made me uneasy again. Any movie that wishes to portray law enforcement as racist has got my sympathy, but in *The Longest Yard* the cards are stacked so artlessly that it feels like propaganda. If there was a non-white guard, the detail escaped my notice, and as an example of the innate racial bias the guards exhibit I offer this sample dialogue: "Does the N-word offend you, nigger?"

The brutality with which these guards treat their charges reaches beyond the credible into parody: they kick inmates into rooms and they kick them off buses, they're willfully cruel at every opportunity. It becomes a little insane. Watching these jailhouse sadists it's possible that, before long, some of us might find ourselves remembering World War II kind of wistfully.

In the case of the inmates, on the other hand, *The Longest Yard* plays the same transparent game of horseshit that *The Shawshank Redemption* pulled: it renders them sympathetic by omitting information about how it is that they came to serve time in the first place. Serial rape might strain our good will. (In Sandler's case the movie goes out its way to justify the joyride that lands him in the pen by showing that he's only escaping his girlfriend, a shallow bitch — one who hangs out with gay men, no less.)

And a guy could go mad sorting out the race issue among the inmates. Initially *The Longest Yard* shows us that the prison population largely sticks to its own race-wise, but they differ from the guards — they're shown to be ultimately more noble — because they learn to overcome these differences.

There is no evidence, in *The Longest Yard*, of the kind of prison hate groups that Bill Moyer reports on nightly on the small screen, and for the sake of a football movie we can let that go.

But why — for god's sake why? — does it have to be a white guy and his colored sidekick that the races unite around every single time?

I understand that Sandler acted as a producer on this film, and I assume that he did it for the purpose of starring. And as an actor and producer he has an admirable record in terms of producing inclusive works. But at the risk of being the killjoy here, I raise the objection on the grounds that this pattern is so familiar that I think it goes unnoticed, maybe even among minorities.

I'm ready for the movie in which it's a black man or woman — and not a freak or a token, but a regular black citizen — who is the one building bridges (unless, of course, it's the self-conscious point of the entire film — another form of condescension). Why won't I get that film? Because Hollywood, despite its liberal good intentions, is afraid that I won't attend.

This is a cultural, and not a specific, phenomenon, and it would be unfair to charge *The Longest Yard* with racism. The fairest charge you can bring against this film is that it unthinkingly mirrors its audience's preconceptions and the confused attitudes of a lot of just-now-opening minds. In the climactic game the inmates wear black uniforms and the guards white, and I suppose the gesture is meant to be generous rather than empty, obvious, and self-conscious, which is what it is.

And how is it as a movie? Not so bad as I had feared, although you don't have to have seen the original to predict the plot from the opening scenes; given any small piece of this hologram you can reproduce the whole thing.

Director Segal lacks judgment, (after one particularly brutal tackle, the punchline "He shit himself" is delivered five times) but he doesn't go on and on, and he keeps things lively, as though fearing that your attention will stray. He even shoehorns a few women into this all-male environment, although it's mostly their boobs we see.

I was never bored at *The Longest Yard*, but I wasn't necessarily entertained either. Mine was a sociological interest. What's going on?



Opinion line

A parody

Originally published June 16, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)

N

ote: This column is written as a parody of the Wichita Eagle's Opinion Line. The author doesn't actually believe these things. If you are looking for actual bigotry, misogyny, homophobia, Christian intolerance, or catastrophic stupidity, check the Eagle.

■ ■ ■

I wouldn't have a problem with gays if they'd just learn some self-control. Almost anytime I take a shower at the gym I end up getting seduced and having to ball one of them. Come on, you guys. I have a family.

■ ■ ■

If straight guys didn't want it, they wouldn't wear outfits that show off their caboose.

■ ■ ■

So the courts think we need another twenty-five kabillion dollars for the schools. In my day we used our own bones for pencils and wrote our assignments out on bark and leaves. And we got the bejesus beaten out of us, too.

■ ■ ■

And God said it shall rain for forty days and forty nights. And it shall wash away all the heathen casino-wanters and the birth control-takers and the smokers with their prenuptial agreements and all that. And it was so.

■ ■ ■

If the *Eagle* would cut one toe off its carriers for every paper they deliver wet then we'd all start getting dry papers in a hurry.

■ ■ ■

If you want my opinion, I think the Indians are doing some sort of rain dance to retaliate against their stolen articles and items at the Indian Center. It's a no-brainer.

■ ■ ■

My granddaughter went on her first date this week and when she came home she was soaked from head to foot in urine. Things sure have changed since I was a girl.

■ ■ ■

We need to focus less on education and more on preventing abortion.

■ ■ ■

How do we know that those cancer people aren't just using marijuana to get high as a kite and go joyriding?

■ ■ ■

I'm facing statutory rape charges. The last thing I want is to have a bunch of freaked-out potheads sitting on my jury.

■ ■ ■

I have ADD and the only thing I've found that helps at all is to smoke crack cocaine. Every day I have to make the agonizing choice of risking the slammer or living in painful distraction.

■ ■ ■

I've noticed that my hands are like fiberglass receptacles or transmitters of some kind, and also that there is now more electricity in the water than before. If I shampoo, I become more lucid. It's because the oil blocks the electricity.



Senseless gore fills *High Tension*

Originally published June 16, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)



SPOILER ALERT: You won't want to see it anyway, or if you do you already have, so we don't mind telling you that she did it. But after watching the movie, we aren't sure why or how she did it.

I

n 1997 director Michael Haneke used his film *Funny Games* to comment on such filmmaking as that in the new French import *High Tension*.

Haneke's film detailed the graphic torture and murder of a family by a pair of remorseless, baby-faced sociopaths who, the audience is given to understand, will move on to its next set of victims when this one is done. Haneke didn't provide a motive for the appalling, unblinking violence he presented, but he did offer a rationale: Is this, his film asked, entertainment? How could it be? What is there in the close-up slaughter of an innocent family to enjoy? *Funny Games* gave its audience what Haneke felt that the audience imagined it wanted, carried to an unconscionable extreme. And as the blood sprayed across the walls of its victims' home, the movie asked us if we were having fun.

Funny Games is rough going on the viewer, but it makes its point, and its craftsmanship is beyond debate. *High Tension* (*Haute Tension*) is rough going, period, and that's the most positive remark about it that I have to make.

High Tension opens with a straightforward revelation of its "surprise" ending during a dream sequence, and then chronicles a trip undertaken by two best friends (Alex, played by Maïwenn Le Besco, and Marie, played by Cécile De France) to visit Alex's family in rural southern France. There a madman comes in the night, killing all but Marie, whom he overlooks, and Alex, whom he binds and carries away for his future amusement. Marie tracks Alex and the killer in hopes of saving her, and it's then that the material takes its declared turn.

The hype accompanying *High Tension*, including some favorable quotes from critics, is that it's

terrifying.

It's gruesome, granted, but is it frightening? I don't think so; there's very little suspense and far too much elaborate bloodletting.

Watching a scene like the one in which one of the young women, her hair stringy with blood, extracts a piece of windshield from her Achilles' tendon as she crawls screaming down a roadway, or another in which the other woman masturbates while her host is painstakingly beheaded in another part of the house, it never occurred to me that what I was watching was "scary" or that I was having fun. "Graphic" and "senseless" describe it better. If I looked away, it wasn't the material's power but rather its indecency that caused me to.

It's bad form for a critic to review the audience, but I have to ask: If you're the audience for *High Tension*, who exactly are you? It was a relief to watch viewers walk out on the sparsely attended matinee I saw, but then who are all these enthusiastic fans?

The unpaced, relentless violence of *High Tension* has the same appeal, for me, as documentary footage of abortions or pogroms.

I was surprised when the murder of a little boy, who earlier in the day had been anxious for his older sister to see him in his new cowboy suit, took place out of sight; but director Alexandre Aja was ahead of me, and as we leave the site of the killing a crane shot pans up over the corpse. Who's having fun? And if you're not at *High Tension* for entertainment, what *are* you doing there?

Questions of amusement aside, *High Tension* boasts an improbability so humbling that a rational person quakes before it.

What follows may amount to a spoiler, but in reality there's not much to ruin since, as mentioned above, the film's trick ending is stated in plain words and simple images as soon as the have credits have run.

Knowing it in advance – knowing that Marie is in fact the killer and that the man we see committing the murders on-screen is a figment of her mind – has the effect of rendering the plot comically bizarre.

Watching Marie pursue the killer's truck in a car she's stolen, pedestrian technicalities nag at the mind. Who's driving these two cars? Where did the killer's truck come from in the first place? When a circular saw is produced you're forced to assume that Marie thought to pack it. And you can't help wondering why it is that she waited to abduct her friend until they had arrived at the family home.

But of course, Marie *had* to wait or else the family wouldn't have been slaughtered. And if the family isn't slaughtered, we're not having fun.

High Tension is loathsome filmmaking, just as stupid and pointlessly brutal as *Saw*, although I imagine that *High Tension*'s French provenance gives it an air of respectability that it doesn't

deserve.

Incidentally, much of this picture is badly dubbed, rather than subtitled, so as not to divert attention from its carnage. It's proof that dogshit like this smells the same in any language.



***Madagascar* is a meager beast**

Originally published June 9, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)



TASTY FRIENDS: When New York zoo animals find themselves washed ashore in Madagascar, Alex the lion has to come to terms with his natural place as top predator.

O

ne way I've found of causing people to dismiss my opinions of movies outright is to mention that I walked out on Pixar's *The Incredibles*. I didn't dislike the movie, exactly, and I recognized its virtues: smartly-drawn characters, really witty writing, a wealth of detail, self-awareness, and a truly all-ages appeal.

But in a way it was these same virtues that drove me from the theater; it began to seem to me that intelligence and sophistication had, at Pixar, become formulaic and rather easily achieved. *The Incredibles* didn't hold me because its very proficiency began to tire.

The new Dreamworks feature *Madagascar* is built on the same hip, Pixar model, but here proficiency has been replaced by imitation. That is to say, the film contains all the elements needed to make it the box office hit it already is, but its conception is lazy and it feels for most of

its length as though it was conceived for purposes of box office alone.

For me, professionalism drained the life out of *The Incredibles*. *Madagascar* doesn't have much life to begin with.

The plot is both meager and sloppy. A quartet of animals – a lion, a zebra, a giraffe, and a hippopotamus – are to be relocated from their home at New York's Central Park Zoo to a nature preserve in Kenya. En route a squad of paramilitary penguins mutiny the ship carrying them, and our heroes are eventually stranded in the wilds of Madagascar.

There the four begin to adapt to the wild; unfortunately, adaptation for Alex the Lion (blandly voiced by Ben Stiller) includes the discovery that he is programmed to hunt and kill wild game such as his friends.

This is a perilously thin plot and its queasy central conflict has no easy resolution; will Alex starve to death, eat his friends, or what? It doesn't come as much of a surprise when *Madagascar* cops out on this issue in the end since a reasonably believable denouement would cost the film its PG.

What is surprising is the milquetoast characters at the film's center. Besides Alex, we have an uninspired Marty the Zebra (Chris Rock), Melman the Giraffe (David Schwimmer) whose character is hypochondria and nothing else, and Gloria the Hippo (Jada Pinkett Smith) who's on hand to provide a tired sampling of stereotyped black female sass.

We're told that these four are inseparable but never given a clue as to why. They're colorless and arbitrary. Gloria the Hippo is never even called upon to use her skill as a swimmer, or Melman the Giraffe his height, to save the day. Even the location is random; the Madagascar presented here isn't specific to the actual country in any way.

All the fun in *Madagascar* is crammed into the supporting roles. Besides the penguins (they're amusing at first, but the joke wears thin) and a pair of learned monkeys who are dropped from the action, reappearing only in the final frames, the picture boasts an array of lemurs native to the island, and it's only in their presence that *Madagascar* comes alive. These lemurs have spooky orange and yellow eyes and they live life as though it were a perpetual rave. Their three featured representatives are marvelous: there's witless King Julian (voiced with real imagination and talent by Sacha Baron Cohen), his assistant Maurice (a dryly amusing Cedric the Entertainer), and, best of all, a timid cry-baby mouse lemur named Mort (Andy Richter, mostly emitting little whining noises) whose lower eyelids fill with tears and arc upwards at the slightest provocation.

Director Tom McGrath – he shares the credit with Eric Darnell – worked on *The Ren & Stimpy Show*, and Mort is the one character who displays something like that pair's spastic energy.

Compared with these leaping, eccentric, and really funny creatures, the central quartet of *Madagascar* is an annoyance. I felt that these four acted as a governor on my enjoyment of the film; I had the physical urge to push them aside any time their supporting cast was on the screen. Who would you rather hang out with: the 24-hour-party lemurs, or a clique of soft-serve archetypes bearing a tedious and droopy message of tolerance and respect? Dreamworks made

the wrong movie. It's sad that their lazy effort paid off.



Opinion line

A parody

Originally published June 2, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)

N

ote: This column is written as a parody of the Wichita Eagle's Opinion Line. The author doesn't actually believe these things. If you are looking for actual bigotry, misogyny, homophobia, Christian intolerance, or catastrophic stupidity, check the Eagle.

■ ■ ■

Do the math. A 10% pay cut comes out to about four cents per dollar, or approximately \$8 for every \$100,000 earned. In other words, a Boeing worker making \$180,000 would lose only about \$11 per year with the new Onex contract. Meanwhile I'm separating cattle hooves from legs with a spray solvent at a rendering plant for \$4.25 an hour. Shame on you, you greedy union commies.

■ ■ ■

I thought that the Onex offer was fair, but then I have to ask myself if I'd want to work for a bunch of French-speaking Canadians. Many of them are unsightly and they worship the King of England, whereas down here we're Americans.

■ ■ ■

Laugh and dance, children of Boeing, laugh and dance. Soon the dark of night will enfold you.

- - -

■ ■ ■

What did those overpaid Boeing workers expect? Maybe a birthday card with a little picture of Jesus or something and some gift certificates to Braums? Well I hate their goddamn guts.

■ ■ ■

Aren't those liberals a piece of work? We vote them out and vote them out, and yet they still managed to cost me my Boeing job.

■ ■ ■

Muslimism calls for human sacrifices. It's a fact.

■ ■ ■

It seems to me that maybe God did create white people while your blacks evolved up from animals and fish and stuff. Maybe we should look for a middle ground instead of calling names.

■ ■ ■

You evolutionists must not visit the zoo. Those monkeys out there shriek and fling poo and pick at their own bottoms. Whose family tree did they fall out of?

■ ■ ■

I'll stop smoking in restaurants as soon as people stop bringing their horrible children in. They're dirty and loud and I don't want to catch one of their horrible venereal diseases.

■ ■ ■

Retarded people make me uncomfortable when I'm eating. Maybe they could have a separate area.

■ ■ ■

Me personally, I can't think of a single thing that I'm not 100% entitled to.

■ ■ ■

To the guy who mocked me in front of my two little boys: I won't make fun of your mullet if you won't make fun of my Wookiee costume. Show some respect.



Sith is part of a dark empire

Originally published June 2, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)



PRETTY BOY VADER: Hayden Christensen is ideal as a lead that doesn't have to say much but look good.

R

ight away in the new *Star Wars: Episode III — Revenge of the Sith*, one Jedi turns to another and says, "I sense Count Dooku." I was thinking that I sensed Count Dooku, too — loads of it — and we were only a few minutes into two-and-a-half hours of film. But once I stopped laughing, and after I made a mental effort to view the film like any other and not the solemn occasion that George Lucas seems to intend, I found that I was having a pretty good time.

What are Lucas's intentions? In 1977 he made a hot-rod sci-fi film that, with an assist from Steven Spielberg, changed the landscape of filmmaking for the decades to come. The original *Star Wars* bucked the system both in its content and its swashbuckler style; it, like its heroes, announced a clear-cut rebellion against the status quo, and its breathless action sequences and unambiguous morality found an audience starving for just such escapism.

Twenty-eight years later Lucas has *become* the status quo, and it looks as though another mutiny will be necessary to rid the screen of the swollen production, cluttered frames, and daunting back story that his new film typifies. In bringing complexity, production, and sobriety to the *Star Wars* franchise, Lucas has let go of the childlike enchantment that drew us into his world in the first place. *Star Wars* was a gamble in 1977. In 2005 *Revenge of the Sith* is the Empire.

Not anyone could have made *Star Wars*, though, and *Revenge of the Sith* finds plenty of occasions to remind an audience of its director's skill.

The ridiculously overextended plot can be boiled down to its central conflict: Annakin Skywalker (played by Hayden Christensen) is gradually seduced to the dark side while his fellow Jedi scramble to contain a certain General Grievous and bring an end to the ongoing war. Many a battle is chronicled as this plot unfolds and, while none boasts the crystal clear action and bravura rhythms of the original's action sequences, Lucas manages a different kind of highly polished suspense in many.

If his handling of parallel action is awkward, his convincing portrayal of space and distance compensates. If his visual magic feels store-bought, there remains a certain kind of pleasure that a lavish budget in a skilled storyteller's hands can supply.

In the lead, Christensen is in some ways ideal as Skywalker; that is to say, he holds the camera and contributes a star's presence — a different thing from acting, but it's what the script calls for. A friend described bearded Ewan McGregor, playing Obi-Wan Kenobi, as too "faggy"; I think what she wanted was "serene," and it's true that the character's thoughtful nobility asks too little of its intelligent star. Ian McDiarmid, as the nefarious chancellor, is a villain to be cherished, and I think he would be even without all the make-up and effects.

I don't want to supply still more momentum to *Revenge of the Sith* by writing volumes on it; my point is that it's a reasonably enjoyable fantasy picture that's gathered disproportionate cultural authority. How disproportionate? At the boxoffice, a sign informed me that Lucas himself prohibits the sale of food or drink during screenings of his film. Most movies strive to answer the demands of their audiences. *Revenge of the Sith* is in the rare position of being able to make demands of its own.



***5 Conversations* a quality release**

One of our own films one of his own, and he owns it.

Originally published May 26, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)



COURTESY PHOTOS

HAPPENS A LOT AT CLUB INDIGO: Zoe Burgess (left) plays an executive out to seduce and reject her assistant (Alex Dryden) while the bartender (Meredith Jones) sneaks a listen.



TIGHT ON THE FACES: Jason Miller has the look of the devil about him when playing a womanizing misogynist. It's some of his best work to date.

5 Conversations, the new release from Wichita's Films on Consignment, will make its debut 7:30 p.m. Saturday, May 28, at the Orpheum Theatre. Written, produced, and directed by *F5*'s resident film critic Jason Bailey, *5 Conversations* is an adaptation of his own play, which was staged almost exactly one year ago at The Poorman's Theatre Festival at the Fisch Haus.

In its stage form, this material went by the same title, *5 Conversations*, and the film retains the play's structure and, despite the abbreviated title, its focus: the complications of romantic love.

The setting is a bar (Club Indigo; the film was shot on location in Wichita) where five different couples simultaneously ponder love's mysteries; the film eavesdrops, presenting the conversations in their entirety one after another, and by the film's end Bailey has found a couple of ways to intertwine these disparate lives and to provide some fairly ingenious surprise.

Bailey is a witty writer, as *F5* readers will surely know. What doesn't emerge in these pages is his

ear for dialogue, and, since *5 Conversations* comprises dialogue and little else, the film's success is a testament to his gift.

These conversations proceed thusly: there's a workplace romance in the offing, a pair of young professional men whose marriages are troubled, two single women in a related predicament, a barroom intellectual who helplessly demeans his fiancée, and an aspiring writer who makes a play for a woman with a secret.

Bailey dissects these 10 (plus a bartender who interacts with them all and acts as the film's moral center) with intelligence, and in creating them he draws on what he loves best: the movies.

Not to say that the men and women of *5 Conversations* aren't "real" (an exception being a stripper who's rather more like a straight man's fantasy of a stripper; I noticed she was reading Dorothy Parker), only that they're real through the filter of entertainment. Bailey has absorbed an enormous amount of film and theater, and he's refined these influences — and his inestimable love of them — into *5 Conversations* more successfully than ever before. It's his passion, and it's the source of what's best about the picture.

In making *5 Conversations* Bailey overcomes at least one daunting obstacle. Filming material that originated on the stage is a tricky business. At worst the result is set-bound, cramping a medium that will always want a bigger canvas than a single set provides; and only slightly less claustrophobic are those films that self-consciously "open up" material by pointlessly relocating action without integrating scenes.

Bailey's approach to this problem is, it seems to me, a sensible one: he acknowledges his film's theatrical source by avoiding distractions and allowing the dialogue to carry the action, and he limits cinematic flourishes to the film's transitions, coda, and, very successfully, a virtuoso pre-title sequence.

And he avoids the worst-case scenario that often arises when a writer is filming his own material: a reverent approach. While *5 Conversations* is not always as economical as it might be, there's no ostentation on view.

5 Conversations wouldn't be a movie if I didn't have some qualms with it. Here I feel that the actors were shot too closely; I found myself wishing for medium shots, and I worried that the performances were keyed a single note too high, as though calibrated to an auditorium rather than the intimacy of Matt Frank's camera. And the film's shot/reverse shot structure is too unvaried, so that alternate perspectives, when they occur, stand out.

Elsewhere *5 Conversations* is, as budgeted, a technical marvel. In fact, what stands between Bailey's work here and a major release *is* the budget; he demonstrates a proficiency, in terms of craft, that directors like McQ or Antoine Fuqua would do well to envy. The aforementioned prologue, in particular, exhibits an ease that reads as exuberance, and a filmmaker's exuberance is one of the most pleasurable sensations we can experience at the movies.

Another is a good performance, especially a newcomer's, and here *5 Conversations* offers a standout turn by Wichitan Rebekah Dryden as the bullied fiancée. (All of the performers are, so far as I know, local talent.) Playing opposite Mac Welch — in another good performance —

Dryden exhibits naturalness and enormous charm. Hers is a real presence, and I look forward to seeing her more.

Jason Miller and Nathan Cadman anchor the second episode. Cadman's is a romantic contrivance, and he plays it for the appropriate decency and laughs, but Miller is scarily real as a rogue misogynist womanizer. He's done this well before, but age is giving him a troubling authority, and I've never seen him act more credibly. In the film's opening conversation, Zoe Burgess gives an imaginative performance as a power-mad executive who needs to confirm her attractiveness by seducing and then rejecting her assistant (Alex Dryden). Burgess is an intelligent actress; if she, like many of her co-stars, seems broad, it may be the case that Bailey's background in theater is partly the cause.

That's a minor complaint, and good performances by Amy Grimm, Megan Upton-Tyner, Anna Horsch, Kenneth Mitchell, and Meridith Jones — all of whom maintain our interest despite a lack of traditional action — are the proof. The real accomplishment, though, is Bailey's; it's his smart, funny, and often insightful wordplay that keeps these *5 Conversations* alive. It's a pleasure for me to offer this genuinely-felt salute to my *F5* colleague on a job well done.



Opinion line

A parody

Originally published May 19, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)

N

ote: This column is written as a parody of the Wichita Eagle's Opinion Line. The author doesn't actually believe these things. If you are looking for actual bigotry, misogyny, homophobia, Christian intolerance, or catastrophic stupidity, check the Eagle.

■ ■ ■

Where exactly is this low-pressure system that the weathermen have been talking about? Hello! Those guys are duping us, and I for one am sick and tired of their lies.

■ ■ ■

Tony Blair's OK, I guess, but I wouldn't feel safe with a commander-in-chief that girly. Compared to him, the fellow my wife bought her drapes from was rugged. Plus even the normal-sized British men sound like pussies when they talk.

■ ■ ■

I wouldn't share a burning trench with a European, let alone a little tent and toilet in Iraq. It's a well-known fact that foreigners won't bathe.

■ ■ ■

Go on home, France and Spain. In my opinion, us Americans can finish off a little country like Iraq on our own, thank you very much.

■ ■ ■

Even the atheist science teachers admit that evolution is just a theory. Show us some proof. I've got a theory, too: it's a bunch of baloney.

■ ■ ■

Those arrogant evolutionists don't know when to quit.

■ ■ ■

It's not true that one of Susan Peters' legs is shorter than the other. I was behind her at Sam's Club. She's a classy gal.

■ ■ ■

I wish someone would explain to me this business about the kids getting banged by a grown-up and going on trial up there at Disneyland or something. Were the kids especially injured? And what on earth is that thing that's on trial?

■ ■ ■

He may have his problems, but you've got to admit that Dennis Rader can write. Reading his poetry is like holding precious jewels on your tongue.

■ ■ ■

They ought to go ahead and make abortion an official River Festival event. Line up, whores, and don't forget your buttons.

■ ■ ■

Without my daughter's testimony, my ex-husband might have gone scot-free. What if I had had an abortion instead?

■ ■ ■

Here in Abortion Capital, USA, a hailstorm is the least we should expect on Mother's Day. Throw in a casino and Sunday liquor sales, and we'll all have Black Death by Thanksgiving.



Opinion line

A parody

Originally published April 28, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)

N

ote: This column is written as a parody of the Wichita Eagle's Opinion Line. The author doesn't actually believe these things. If you are looking for actual bigotry, misogyny, homophobia, Christian intolerance, or catastrophic stupidity, check the Eagle.

- Regarding the "I'm a Brownbacker" bumper stickers: What you do behind closed doors is your business, but keep it to yourself. What if a child read that?
- There's been enough sex in the Oval Office lately, anal or otherwise. The last thing we need is to elect a butt burglar like Brownback.
- With Brownbacking in the spotlight so much, we need to remember that we're still a long ways from an AIDS cure. Take precautions, people.
- President Brownback? Why, I'd feel embarrassed even saying it.
- So the collection at the [Mid-America All-]Indian Center has been looted. Well we all better get busy and sharpen some more sticks and rocks for them. Don't forget the yarn, too.

- Rivers are supposed to be for having cookies with your grandchildren and looking up showtimes for *Pocahontas*. We have enough abortion and murder without putting a casino down there.
- If you want to gamble that bad, you can start by sending your kids to Southeast.
- We won't let our troops take orders from foreign generals, but then we go and elect another foreign pope. What's the difference? Wake up and smell the coffee.
- Jesus was an attractive young man. Why should the pope always have to be so unsightly?
- I'm that new pope. When *60 Minutes* is on, I'm Diane Sawyer too. You cannot see it and yet it is true.
- Since when is the mayor a damned Mexican? They slipped that one in while we weren't looking. Us whites are getting our rights stripped away one by one.
- I can't get a good job because the minorities have taken them all. Then I go to get welfare and the minorities have got all of that, too. I guess I'll have to go homo or crippled if I want to get ahead.



***Amityville Horror* is, surprise, no surprise**

Oh, sure, it's got its startling moments, but it's far from haunting.

Originally published April 21, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)



ISN'T IT SUPPOSED TO BE SNOWING?: Andrew Douglas's *The Amityville Horror* borrows so heavily from Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* that not only is the ax-swinging sequence nearly the same, so to are the lines of the little possessed children.



OOOO, SPOOOKY OOOLD HOOOUSE: The film is cliché and just leaves you empty at the end with nothing to think about.

I

n 1977, when Jay Anson's book came out (and to a far lesser extent in 1979 when the movie arrived), the scariest thing about *The Amityville Horror* was a red-eyed pig named Jody that appeared, as I recall, in the windows of the reportedly haunted house in Amityville, Long Island. This pig, with its adorably innocuous name, went unexplained in the book and original film, but

it was clearly malevolent and too weird to be believed. Or do I mean that it was too weird to be *disbelieved*? A massive effort was launched by Anson to pass *The Amityville Horror* off as nonfiction at the time, and it seemed to me then that that one detail lent credence to it all. A scary, red-eyed pig named, of all things, Jody: who would make *that* up?

Jody the Pig kept me awake nights in 1979. Today there's a new *Amityville Horror* in the theaters, and Jody is now not a pig at all but rather the sympathetic ghost of a little girl who sports a gunshot wound on her forehead and who carries around a teddy bear with one of its eyes poked out. This new Jody appears suddenly in the frame in the new film, shocking the bejesus out of you, but her presence in the overall scheme of things is carefully explained — everything in the new film is — and when you're turning in for the night there's no mystery to ponder. In that way, *The Amityville Horror*, like most recent horror movies, resembles an extreme carnival ride: it roughs you up while you're experiencing it, but there's nothing left of the thrill when you're done.

The Amityville Horror documents the first 28 days of residence of the Lutz family in the now-fabled home. It seems that the family living in the home before the Lutzes was murdered in its sleep by the oldest son, who later claimed to have been possessed. This same scenario gets hastily underway with the Lutzes (hasty to the extent that by the end of Day One enough weirdness has occurred to make a rational family forfeit their earnest money and vacate the property), except that now it's the dad (Ryan Reynolds) who is being groomed by the resident demon to do the killing.

Why? We never found out in the '70s, but now our patience is rewarded: a crazy puritan of some kind founded a church there a long, long time ago and subsequently tortured Indians for their paganism; he eventually cut his own throat in order to ensure that his spirit would stay on in the house forever. It has, and now Jody is unwillingly made to act as his pawn as he mesmerizes young men and gets them to kill their families.

The explanation we've waited for isn't especially imaginative and it certainly isn't frightening. (How many of us have to worry that our 40-year-old homes are inhabited by the spirits of murderous pilgrim zealots?) And director Andrew Douglas isn't content merely to hint at it: he shows us the whole thing, from soup to nuts, right up there on the screen. The images are silly at best, and at worst they're standard, pulled the same shallow bag of photographic and editing tricks that every horror film currently employs. And of course they can't match what our imaginations might have come up with if the whole thing had been only hinted at, or unexplained, or even dimly seen.

Which isn't to say that the original was any kind of masterpiece — it was ridiculous in ways that even the teenaged me spotted — but at least the filmmakers understood that the scariest part of the supernatural is that it *can't* be explained.

My final thought about *The Amityville Horror* is that it's good that the filmmakers have largely dropped the pretense that it's based on fact. The logical shortcomings of such a claim wouldn't fool a child, and it's too arbitrary to be asked to treat this film as "real," but not *The Ring* or *The Grudge* or, for that matter, *101 Dalmatians*. But the thought came to me anyway as I watched Mr. Lutz walk into a closet on the ceiling of which Jody is being restrained by the evil puritan guy. Mr. Lutz never even sees this happen — no character in the movie does — and it made me

wonder: Who reported that detail? Was the director *there*?



Opinion line

A parody

Originally published April 14, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)

N

ote: This column is written as a parody of the Wichita Eagle's Opinion Line. The author doesn't actually believe these things. If you are looking for actual bigotry, misogyny, homophobia, Christian intolerance, or catastrophic stupidity, check the Eagle.

- Handicapped parking? I have loads of crippled friends, but my feeling is that if you can't walk a few extra steps into Dillards, then you have no business being behind the wheel.
- People are always complaining about elderly drivers, honking and passing and tailgating. I'm a senior myself and I want you all to know that the only way you'll get my driver's license from me is to pry it from my cold, dead hands.
- Here comes the goddamn River Festival. Hoo boy.
- I'm not going to any festival on any river that I can't even drink.
- More people would go the River Festival if it weren't so crowded.
- You can beat the gays in the parks and you can beat them at the polls. Either way they're going to go whining to a judge.
- I was never much into learning how to read. I want to thank the friendly citizen who helped me press the right button to vote against the gays.
- Don't tell me that those Powerpuff Girls aren't a pack of lesbians. In my day "puff" was one of their code words.
- I'm a member of a pro-gay hate group and I've got a warning for you Christians: Now the killing begins.
- I love abortion. The staff is friendly and afterwards you get a free snack or juice.
- Rap music such as Red Hot Chili Peppers and Britney Spears is about one thing only:

Fornication. May the good Lord have mercy on us all.

- English should be this country's official language, period. My wife and I rented a movie recently, and it turned out to be a bunch of gibberish with the English words printed in little letters at the bottom. What is this world coming to?
- Advice to Hollywood: If you can't afford to make your movie in English, then don't bother to make it at all. And that goes for the colored talking and the Mexicans, too.



Sahara floats on shallow waters

Originally published April 14, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)



RAISE YOUR HANDS IF YOU'RE A SWAGGERING FAUX REDNECK HIPPIE: Matthew McConaughey's sandy vehicle, *Sahara*, could almost be self-aware fun if the second half didn't have America coming to the rescue of a Muslim country being aided by a French villain. Sigh.

A

s entertainment, the new adventure picture *Sahara* isn't so bad, but you couldn't blame anyone for emerging from it feeling a little queasy just the same.

Set, I believe, in the early 1990s, and based on one of Clive Cussler's Dirk Pitt novels, the film follows the exploits of a group of American adventurers as they seek to recover a Confederate

ship from its unlikely final resting place in Mali. A secondary mission presents itself in the form of an attractive World Health Organization doctor (Penelope Cruz); she's trying to staunch the spread of a nascent plague whose epicenter is suspiciously nearby, and of course a romance blooms between her and Pitt (Matthew McConaughey). The action plays out against the backdrop of a Malian civil war, and the warlord who acts as dictator is determined that, due to a preposterous plot contrivance, none of these Americans leaves his country alive.

There's everything not to like about *Sahara*, but the sum is somehow, marginally, better than its parts. These parts are truly cobbled together.

The movie draws on the tradition of romantic screen adventure typified by such 1930s features as *Gunga Din* and *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, and it aspires to the kind of self-aware fun that Spielberg brought to the genre when he revived it with his *Indiana Jones* films.

But its screenwriters (there are four — at least two too many — and ampersands appear in their credits, indicating trouble) and its director, Breck Eisner, can't resist the temptation to flex some cinematic muscle in the second half and the picture becomes uncomfortably paramilitary, more *Tears of the Sun* than *The Man Who Would Be King*.

But *Sahara*'s biggest problem is twofold: the film's subtle ideological bent is alarming, and, in the lead, McConaughey is only just barely tolerable.

It could be that these two problems are fundamentally intertwined, especially given McConaughey's executive producer credit. *Sahara* is intended as a vehicle for McConaughey's charms, but in reality you sit through it despite, rather than because, of him. And the film embodies an almost preconscious cultural arrogance that's all tied up with McConaughey's conception of who this character is.

What are McConaughey's charms? There's the torso, which he's well aware of, but he otherwise stakes his appeal on a public image as a good-time-loving, regular guy who gets stoned, lives in a college town, and is arrested playing the bongos in the nude.

Like his acting, this is meant to seem carefree, but watching him on-screen you can't help but wonder if it isn't carefully calculated instead.

His Dirk Pitt is meticulously casual; with his long hair, open shirts, and turquoise choker he resembles a kind of fit, 21st-century Jimmy Buffett, except that he's more deeply tanned and his eyebrows bear evidence of shaping. It's vanity parading as indifference.

When "Sweet Home Alabama" plays on the soundtrack — and it does — the bullshit swagger fits like a glove.

But McConaughey's bullshit swagger fits into *Sahara*'s attitude, too. (Spoiler to follow.)

In America we've become inured to the convention in which our countrymen travel to distant lands in order to kick ass, put other countries back in working order, and save the world. (Imagine a film in which a Malian couple travels to Los Angeles and sorts out the police force and you can begin to see how ridiculous this might look, seen again and again, overseas.) But

Sahara goes still further than that; by the time I began to read the movie as an apologia for the war in Iraq, I wasn't sure who was hysterical — the filmmakers or me.

One thing I *was* sure of from the moment he appeared on-screen was that the film's lone Frenchman would turn out to be the villain. If the fact of his citizenship hadn't been enough, his sophistication would have; the perceived cultural challenge of all things French is the one thing that angers Americans more than being denied use of French air space.

In *Sahara* a group of Americans travels to a Muslim country governed by a tyrant and discovers a virtual weapon of mass destruction — it's biological, in this case, and the Frenchman is in on it. And from the moment this group becomes embattled, one of its members conspicuously sports a T-shirt that says "New York City." Remember the Alamo.

If the concealed-carry jingoism is fear-inducing, the surprise is that director Eisner's technique sometimes is too, and I mean that in a positive way. His action scenes are too long to be sustained, but they're shot and edited for impact rather than empty style, and they keep you in your seat.

There's a Civil War prologue, in particular, that's agreeably bombastic, and Steve Zahn provides some much-needed presence between explosions.

Penelope Cruz isn't bad, either, William H. Macy shows up, and somehow, despite its schizophrenic structure, its clumsy plot, and its deadly central performance, *Sahara* stays afloat.

If it had been silly rather than serious, its modicum of skill and a lot of good luck might have kept it foundering along.



Opinion Line

A parody

Originally published March 31, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)

N

ote: This column is written as a parody of the Wichita Eagle's Opinion Line. The author doesn't actually believe these things. If you are looking for actual bigotry, misogyny, homophobia, Christian intolerance, or catastrophic stupidity, check the Eagle.

- All this fuss over Terri Schiavo, and yet abortion kills over six billion babies a day. Wake up, America.

- In God's eyes, killing people who have become retarded is just as bad as killing regular ones.
- I am outraged about Schiavo. I recently went through horrible anus surgery. What if my husband had unplugged me?
- Good. Maybe now we can remove (West Virginia Senator) Robert Byrd's feeding tube.
- If God had intended two men to marry, he would have given them vaginas.
- There's limits. I don't mind the lesbians in the movies so much, but that doesn't mean I want to see them at the altar.
- Chick-on-chick action is hot. I like their boobs.
- If God hates fags, then he must be just crazy about Bill Clinton.
- Where on earth is Gerald Ford nowadays? I hope someone is keeping an eye on him. He'd be older now and he fell down a lot, as I recall.
- I've got a message for you downtown arena supporters: Sports kill.
- Easter has become too commercial. I'm a single Boeing worker with eight little mouths to feed, a crack cocaine problem, and a \$110 cable bill. Candy doesn't grow on trees, you know.
- Wasn't Easter glorious this year? The weather was so pretty, with crocus and jonquils blooming everywhere you looked. Our neighbors even brought us a big bunch of early tulips. It makes you sorry for the Jews.



Opinion Line

A parody

Originally published March 17, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)

N

ote: This column is written as a parody of the Wichita Eagle's Opinion Line. For actual bigotry, misogyny, homophobia, religious intolerance, or catastrophic stupidity, check the Eagle.

- I'll bet Jesus saw right through Dennis Rader. It was prayer that caught him.

- So BTK is depressed. Somebody better send that poor serial killer a cookie bouquet.
- I'd kill a lot of people too if I thought I'd get away with it for 31 years.
- It puts the lotion on its back or it gets the hose again.
- I guess the "ADT" in ADT Security must stand for Abduct, Duct tape, and Terminate.
- I didn't even realize there was a Wichita Symphony Orchestra. What a pleasant surprise!
- Regarding the firing of (Boeing CEO) Harry Stonecipher: If we fired every boss who fooled around with the girls at the office, we'd end up with women running everything.
Boy oh boy.
- "Stonecipher" is another word for "witchcraft." Check your Bible.
- Next week I'll turn 60, but I'll still be first in line if public breast feeding is approved.
- Maybe women breast feeding in public and strip clubs in Old Town would help to cut down on all the homosexuals.
- If women stayed home, their breasts wouldn't be a big problem.
- Call me old-fashioned, but I just loved it back when black people couldn't vote.
- To the caller who said that his neighbor's horses were eating all the crows: I've lived on a farm all my life and I've never seen a horse eat one single bird. That's a wives tale.



Opinion line

A parody

Originally published March 3, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)

- Dennis Rader should save the taxpayers money and confess to the BTK killings. He's just as big a coward as the people he killed.
- Congratulations to the Wichita Police Department on a job well done. I'll sleep easier knowing that their 31 years of hard work has paid off.
- If Rader is BTK, then let's give him sodium pentathol (the truth serum) and find out if it's really him or what's really going on.
- I read where BTK took pleasure from torturing animals. Anybody who would do that is the lowest.
- BTK this, BTK that. Not everyone wants to hear about a crazy killer every time they turn on the TV. Come on, people.
- Maybe they should call him BT-KAKE.
- BTK has killed 10 people and then that's all they talk about on the news. But abortion kills many more than that every day and you never hear a word about it.
- District Attorney Nola Foulston is a cunt.
- Please, Wichita drivers! If you see another vehicle on the roadway with you, slow down.
- Look up "marriage" in the dictionary. It doesn't say anything about allowing homosexuals to get hitched.
- If gay marriage is approved, then gays will have access to health insurance and voting. Think about it.
- I hope they don't choose another abstract design for the River Festival this year. That really turns me off.
- Smoking spreads tuberculosis and AIDS. It's public enemy No. 1.



Constantine finds salvation in silliness

Originally published March 3, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)



NO ACTING REQUIRED: Nither Kenue Reeves nor Rachel Weisz raises the bar for thespians, but they've got what it takes to make a movie as goofy as *Constantine* work.

C

onstantine, at first, looks as though it threatens to infringe on a copyright held by William Peter Blatty.

In these opening scenes, a young woman is found crawling around her bedroom ceiling, scarred, snarling, and exhibiting other symptoms that, in movies made since *The Exorcist*, signal diabolical possession as surely as a pathological fear of water indicates rabies at the pound.

Help arrives in the person of the title character, a snappily dressed young exorcist played by Keanu Reeves, and beginning here the picture departs, thankfully, from the pompous stupidity that helped make *The Exorcist* such a blot on film history.

That's not to say that *Constantine* is somehow a *good* movie. But it's reasonably fun, and not so horrible as the other.

What *Constantine* is, in fact, is silly, a quality that *The Exorcist* sought strenuously to avoid. This silliness is its saving grace.

For example, although the plot of *Constantine* uses Catholicism as the taking-off point for its supernatural goings-on, the screenwriters add such extra-biblical enhancements as guns that discharge flaming dragon's breath and brass knuckles inscribed with crucifixes designed for use against Satan and his minions.

In one scene Constantine is attacked by a demon that has taken the form of a swarm of bugs, and there's an amusing few seconds afterwards in which he grimly dances around in the street

squashing those left behind. Hell is depicted as a post-apocalyptic Los Angeles and heaven as a cleaner, daylight one.

And then there's the appearance of the archangel Gabriel, here played, to my surprise, by actress Tilda Swinton. While I never quite figured out if this Gabriel has a sex (and if so, which), I did admire a kind of bra-like outer garment he wears in the film's concluding scenes, and that rides up over the top of his boobs rather than underneath them.

The plot of *Constantine* involves its mortal hero's efforts to prevent the birth of Lucifer's son, an event that would plunge Earth into unending chaos and strife; if, in doing so, he manages to make amends for the suicide attempt that has damned his immortal soul to hell, so much the better.

Constantine is dark and its hero moody, but director Francis Lawrence never acts as though he expects you to take it very seriously.

Lawrence keeps *Constantine* moving without assaulting the audience the way a film like *Boogeyman* does, and, although it's alarmingly pious at times, it maintains a ridiculous, agreeably shallow tone.

The debate regarding whether or not Keanu Reeves can act is, I feel, over, and the verdict doesn't look good. (In fairness, Reeves's delivery has become more relaxed over the years; he seldom seems as desperate on camera as he once did.) Fortunately, *Constantine* doesn't require acting, per se, but rather a handsome lead who can handle a shotgun and say his lines, and Reeves, here in fighting trim once again, fits the bill.

Rachel Weisz plays his love interest, a cop who has suppressed her psychic gift; her part calls for good looks, sensitivity, and a lot of vacant, trance-like looks, and she complies.

(What neither Reeves's nor Weisz's part calls for is nudity; in one scene Weisz asks if she needs to undress before climbing into a bathtub, and when Reeves answers no, the guy I was attending the movie with groaned. I don't mean to demean either actor with a skin-shot tally, but in a no-brain effort like *Constantine* every little thing counts.)

I had vowed recently never again to review a movie based on a comic book. I had a lot of good reasons for this: they're too long and over-plotted, they're packed with extraneous characters, they all have the same brooding non-hero hero, and their loyal fans all write to me after the review is published to tell me that I'm stupid and to explain to me the voluminous back story to the action and all the intricacies I didn't understand.

In comparison to such genre-mates as *Catwoman*, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, *Daredevil*, *Hellboy*, and so on, *Constantine* is actually pretty good (stressing here, again, that the film is *not* conventionally "good"), and part of the reason for that is the imaginative casting of its (inevitably) numerous small parts such as Gavin Rossdale and Djimon Hounsou.

There are two performances of real note: as Constantine's driver, Shia LaBeouf gives a wonderfully addled, determined performance; based on his work here and in 2002's *Holes*, this 18-year-old is among the best actors of his generation. And Peter Stormare gives a hilarious,

imaginative performance as Lucifer.

Stormare's scariness stands out in *Constantine* because everything else about the film is too silly to actually frighten. At one point Reeves puts his feet into a pan of water (water "lubricates the transition from one plane to another") and then stares into the eyes of a cat in order to physically transport himself to hell, and the image of him doing this isn't something that's likely to keep you awake at night. On the other hand, the film is never troublingly brutal; its violence is never credible enough to throw you out of the illusion.

Leaving *Constantine* I didn't feel ripped off or uneasy or angry. Mostly I was just grateful that the cold-hearted makers of *The Exorcist* didn't have access to C.G.I.

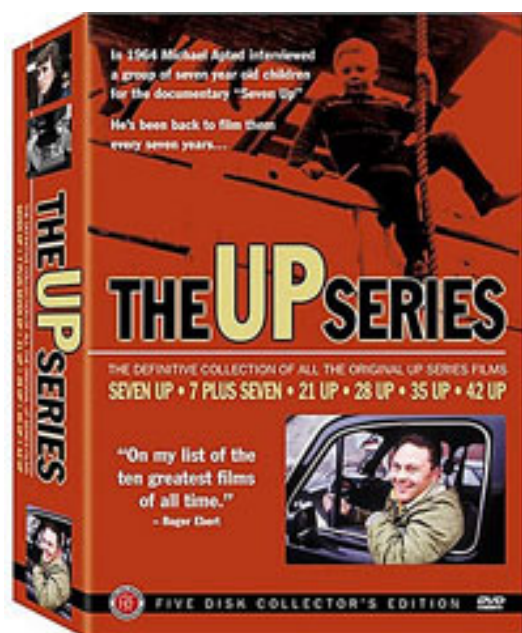


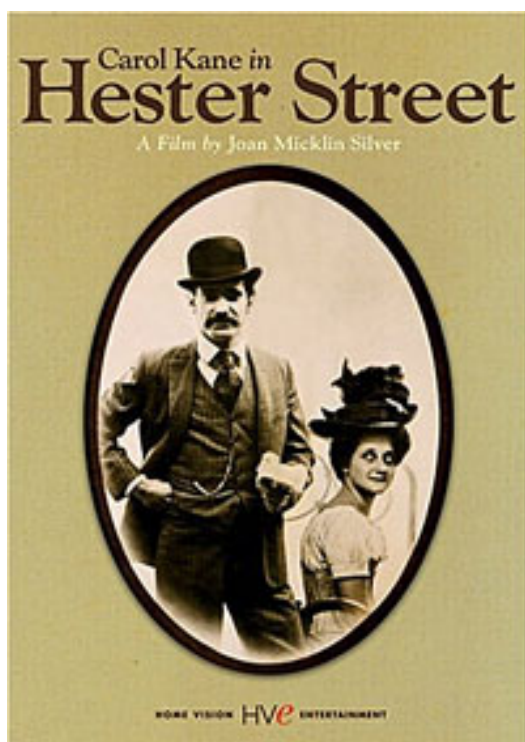
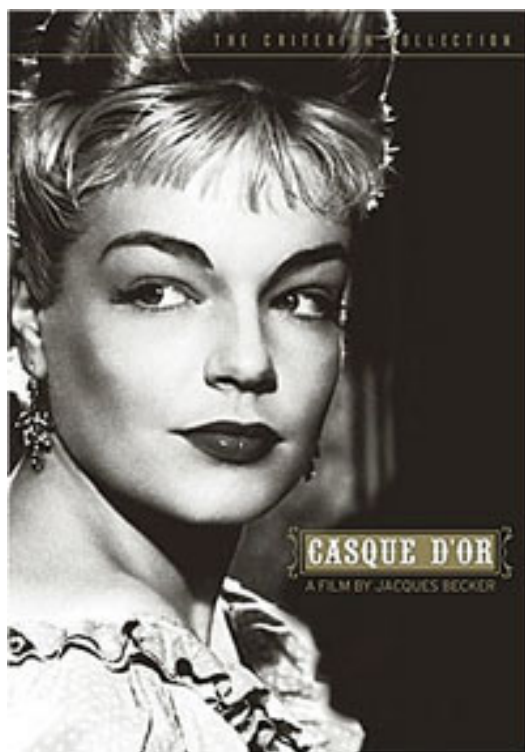
DVD Consumer Guide

A quick look at what's playing at the video store near you.

Originally published February 24, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)







M

ost titles now available.

PICK OF THE WEEK

The "Up" Series F5 This legendary cycle of six feature documentaries is filmmaking in service of something more noble. In 1964, Granada Television in London produced *Seven Up*, an hour-long film in which the lives of 14 7-year-olds from a variety of social backgrounds were examined. Director Michael Apted (who served as a research assistant on the first film, and who went on to make such fine movies as *Coal Miner's Daughter*) returned to the same children seven years later in the film *7 Plus Seven*; *21 Up*, *28 Up*, *35 Up*, and *42 Up* followed at seven-year intervals (*42 Up* came out in 1999), and the resulting nine and a half hours of film ranks among the most effecting use of the documentary form. Apted's emphasis is sometimes off — he tends to harp on the role that privilege and disadvantage has played in the lives of his subjects — but the sheer wonder we feel as we watch these lives taking shape before our eyes eclipses any small complaints; taken as a whole, these films are absolutely involving and more moving than you ever could guess. First Run Features has made the films available for the first time in a five-disk set; it's a must-see.

OTHER NEW RELEASES

***Sixty-nine* F2** It's a disappointment. Thai director Pen-ek Tatanarung's follow-up to *Last Life in the Universe* (below)

***Battles without Honor and Humanity* F4**

***Casque d'or* F5** Jacques Becker is the best French director that most Americans have never heard of, and 1952's *Casque d'or* is both its director's masterpiece and one of the great films in the entire canon of its country's cinema. Before its release on DVD last month by the Criterion Collection, the film had been unavailable for too long; I welcome it back from the bottom of my heart. Although the American title is *Golden Marie*, the French title translates to "golden helmet," a colloquialism for a blonde; the blonde in question here is a youthful, ravishing Simone Signoret, and her irresistibility to a trio of street hoods is the machine driving this tale of bloodshed and jealousy set in 19th-century Paris. It's tough, lyrical, and one of the screen's great romantic tragedies.

***La Cienega* F5**

***Combination Platter* F3** Jeffrey, an undocumented Chinese waiter at a Flushing, New York, restaurant, lives in an America separate from, but parallel to, our own: while we're all familiar with restaurants like the Szechuan Inn, the bare apartment Jeffrey returns to nightly, and the delis and bodegas that dot the urban street corners in his neighborhood, Jeffrey's whole life is confined to locations like these, and he's seen enough immigrants like himself handcuffed and hauled away by Immigration agents to know what might happen if he strays.

***The Garden of Allah* F3**

***Hester Street* F3** This independent 1975 feature earned Carol Kane a best actress nomination and justifiably launched her career. She plays the observant Russian Jewish wife who joins her husband (Steven Keats) on New York's Lower East Side in the late 1800s only to find that he's been irretrievably Americanized — he's shaved, for instance, and changed his name to Jake — and that he's keeping a mistress on the side. Her personal journey leads her to such compromises as showing her hair (a married woman would normally have worn a wig or a kerchief to cover her head), but in the end she finds that she has to find her own way to accommodate life in America. The film was a breakthrough for women in the men's club that was cinema in the '70s, both because of its content and because a woman directed (Joan Micklin Silver, whose best film was 1977's *Between the Lines*, and who, sadly, never really lived up to her potential as a filmmaker). It's entirely worthwhile as a document of life in New York's Jewish tenements, but its miniscule budget pinches and, for this reason and others, its period detail is sometimes unconvincing. From Home Vision Entertainment.

***Last Life in the Universe* F5**

***Little Red Riding Hood* F2**

***The Radley Metzger Collection* F2** Sexual libertine Radley Metzger made a name for himself in the 60s directing the kind of erotic European "art" film that served as pornography for a

generation of American and European moviegoers. It's soft-core, but it's soft-core with a certain, swinging style, and a cult has sprung up around his work among young people who like the films' jazzy, naughty camp. Now three of Metzger's features are available in a box set, with two more due out soon. Volume one includes 1968's *Therese and Isabelle*, an erotic coming-of-age tale that takes place in a French girls' boarding school; 1965's *The Alley Cats*, shot in Berlin, which tells the lounge-inflected story of a curious young woman who decides to "swing," first with a man and then with another woman, when she discovers that her fiancé is doing the same; and 1969's *Camille 2000*, ostensibly a remake of Alexandre Dumas's classic novel (although Greta Garbo is nowhere to be seen this time around) in which an Italian socialite lures a handsome young man (handsome by 60s Euro standards, that is) into a life of tragic decadence. At their best, as in the tony *Alley Cats*, the films are amusingly stylish — lifestyle archaeologists with an interest in the 60s won't want to miss them — and they likely provide a few quaint sexual thrills for straight guys; at their worst, like all pornography, they tend to drag.

***Sex Is Comedy* F4** Catherine Breillat's 2001 *Fat Girl* (itself recently released by the Criterion Collection) reportedly contains a sex scene so graphic and horrifying that the ordeal of filming a scene like it became the subject of this, Breillat's next feature. Unlike *Fat Girl*, 2002's *Sex Is Comedy* takes a dryly humorous view of the proceedings: the neurotic director has fashioned the scene as a fulfillment of her own rape fantasy, the handsome lead actor shyly selects the largest prosthetic penis and then won't take it off, and, as the time approaches to actually film the scene, it becomes obvious that everyone involved in the production is busy rehearsing for sex while assiduously avoiding it. *Sex Is Comedy* takes an absurdist approach to a sophomoric subject and wrings real laughs from its own graphic content; it's a terrific, small, adult comedy about lust, filmmaking, and the human psyche at its most clandestine.

***Thieves' Highway* F5**

***Touchez pas au grisbi* F5**

***Vidas Privadas* F3** Douglas Sirk himself might have balked at melodrama this straight-faced and un-ironic, but the suppressed hysteria of this 2002 Argentinean feature is so relentless that you finally have to kind of admire its resolve. Almodóvar actress Cecilia Roth (*All About My Mother*) stars as a troubled woman who returns to her Buenos Aires home for the first time in decades to oversee the dispersal of her terminally-ill father's estate; there she encounters a virtual army of skeletons-in-the-closet, including one — the hot young model Gustavo (Gael García Bernal) — who's very much alive and breathing. The ensuing coincidences are awesome in their improbability and the tone of the film is unrelentingly autumnal, but if you don't take it so seriously as it's intended, *Vidas Privadas* is a pretty good time. Fito Páez directs.

***The Witch Who Came from the Sea* F3**

***Youth of the Beast* F5** This 1963 yakuza feature, newly available from the Criterion Collection, is a typical exercise in innovation and excess from cult director Seijun Suzuki. While his Japanese contemporaries earnestly set about making formula features on tired studio sets, Suzuki soaked his wildly stylized films in garish Technicolor, indulged in insane camera angles and ridiculous compositions, and amped up his plots to the extent that his studio fired him in 1966 on the grounds that his films were "incomprehensible." True, the film's tangled web of crosses and double-crosses can be hard to follow, but the plot's not the thing in Suzuki. *Youth of the Beast*

stands with his great *Tokyo Drifter* and *Branded to Kill* as the expression of a singular, outrageous talent; you couldn't hope to have a better time at the movies.



Dark horrors confuse shock for fear

Originally published February 17, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)



BOO, YOU'RE SCARED: *Boogeyman*'s Barry Watson in a brief flash of sunlight.



THERE'S A SHOCK: Even the script writer and prop maker for *Hide and Seek* could tell that it was filmed too darkly.

T

urn on the fucking lights! That seems to me to be a good first step for those of you who are, A) facing, at your psychiatrist's insistence, your childhood fears about the boogeyman, or B) attempting to find out what exactly is going on in your little daughter's bedroom involving her violent and maybe-not-imaginary friend Charlie.

Should you find yourself directing a movie about either of the above scenarios, my advice stands. Lighting the rooms in which the action is taking place will have the benefit of making this action visible to the audience. Your characters won't appear to be simpleminded, either, as they threaten to do when they bump along through dark rooms calling out, "Who's there?" Finally, lighting will make your film a lot less bleak, too.

"Bleak" and "poorly lighted" are different things from "scary"; everyone knows that except Hollywood horror film directors. Stephen T. Kay, director of the pointlessly existential *Boogeyman*, and John Polson, director of the embarrassing *Hide and Seek*, keep everything dark and ridiculously intense in the apparent hope that scares will magically follow.

They startle you, confusing shocks with fear, and they amp up the sound effects in hopes of forcing scares on you, but no matter how loud the Dolby-enhanced thunder rips through the surround sound system, their movies aren't scary.

I've been over this a million times, I know, but indulge me as I spell it out once more.

If a friend of yours leaps out at you unexpectedly from a doorway and screams at you as loudly and shrilly as possible as he does it, is this friend providing you with a pleasurable experience? How is what your friend has just done different from punching you? Would you describe what has just happened as "suspense"? Would you wish to spend more time with this particular friend,

or would you instead be a little angry? Now suppose that this same friend behaves this way in a darkened room for an hour and a half without interruption; how do you feel toward him now?

In terms of gratuitous shocks, *Boogeyman* is by far the worst offender of the two abovementioned films, so we'll start there.

Tim (Barry Watson) returns to his hometown for his mother's funeral and spends a night in the abandoned house where, in his childhood, he watched as his father was sucked into a closet by the boogeyman and presumably killed. Without using lights, Tim mills around aimlessly until he discovers a little girl named Franny (Skye McCole Bartusiak) weirdly reclined behind some garbage in an outbuilding. She rides away on her bicycle.

Tim's girlfriend Jessica (Tory Mussett) then arrives and the two leave for a motel. Here the film's narrative point of view is violated irretrievably as Tim's old girlfriend Kate (Emily Deschanel) arrives at Tim's empty house to bring him dinner; she yells for him without turning on lights, while at the motel Tim looks for Jessica in a closet that, in a *Mulholland Dr.*-like twist, opens back into the abandoned, dark house where Kate is waiting.

Tons of horseshit follows, such as a scene in which little Franny, who actually is dead, explains that some nights she just sits in a swing set all night long, before a climactic showdown between Tim and the boogeyman. This showdown is edited so frantically and is so loud that it actually made me mad. Afterwards there's a weird moment in which it feels like a scene is missing or that a different ending has been tacked on to the film at the last moment, and then Tim announces that the boogeyman is gone for good.

To the audience's astonishment, since nothing has been resolved, he is.

The only direct comment I want to make about *Boogeyman* is that Jane Holland's wardrobe design is bad enough to be distracting; you don't see that every day.

In *Hide and Seek*, *everyone's* judgment is bad — not just the filmmakers' but the characters' too. I don't believe that movies need to be able to withstand really stringent logical arguments, but I'm compelled to point out that to be plausible at all the central premise of *Hide and Seek* would require that its main character be at least mildly retarded — and she's not scripted that way. It's a lot of hard work for nothing.

In this outing, a psychologist (Robert De Niro) and his daughter Emily (Dakota Fanning) relocate to upstate New York following Emily's mother's suicide. Emily is adjusting badly enough as it is, but then an imaginary friend named Charlie enters her life, and before long people are getting hurt. The TV ads caution that if you haven't seen *Hide and Seek* you must be careful not to let anyone tell you its secret ending. In reality, I don't see why it would be *necessary* for anyone to tell you; it's perfectly obvious from the very beginning. In case my synopsis didn't give it away, let me just say that *Hide and Seek* may be the most extreme illustration yet of the fears a father faces about his daughter's potential suitors.

Hide and Seek is a better movie than *Boogeyman*, but that's not saying much.

(Neither film, to voice another complaint I've been harboring about horror films lately, is set in

the real world; little Emily doesn't appear to have a computer, for instance, and the TV is shown to be on only once in the whole film. Because she's apparently not in school either, I started to wonder how she spent her days.)

Dakota Fanning is a terrific little actress (she stole what there was to take in *The Cat in the Hat* from her adult co-stars, Alec Baldwin only partially excepted) and it's a pleasure to watch her perform.

Likewise, Amy Irving, who appears briefly as the mother, and whom we haven't seen much of lately save for *Carrie* reruns.

But in the end, as with *Boogeyman*, the sheer stupidity of the enterprise brings it down.

Directors Kay and Polson provide the trappings, but if you want horror, you'll need to bring your own.

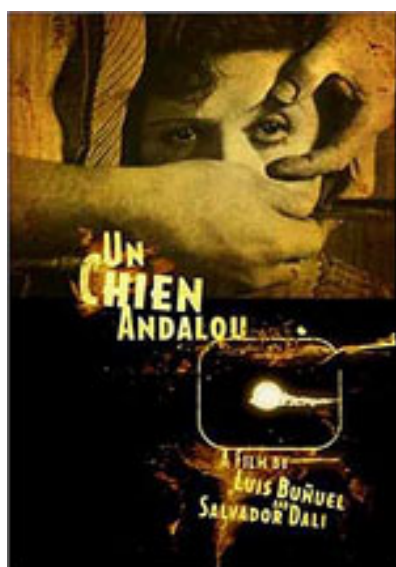


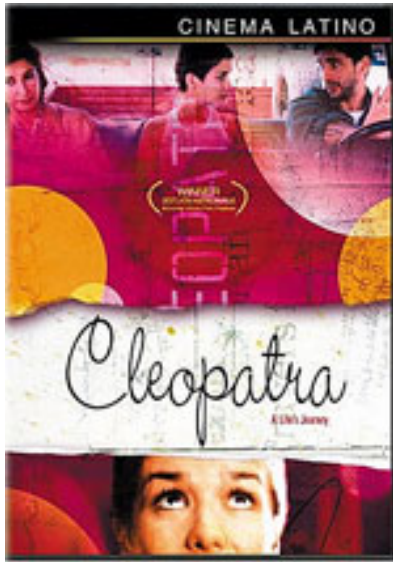
Fresh DVDs bring back highlights of the past

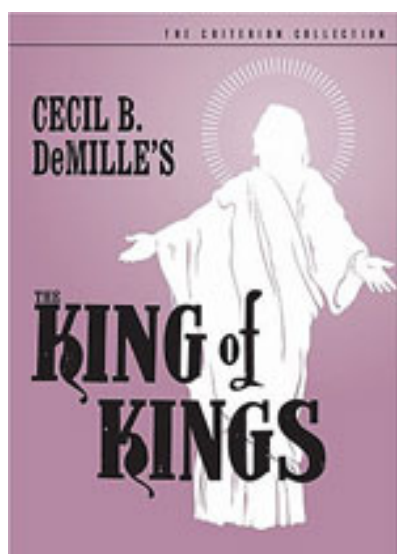
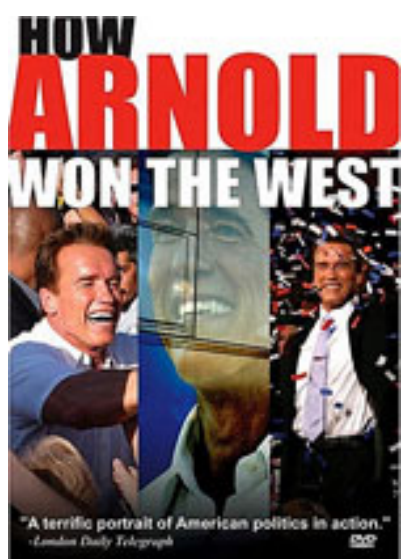
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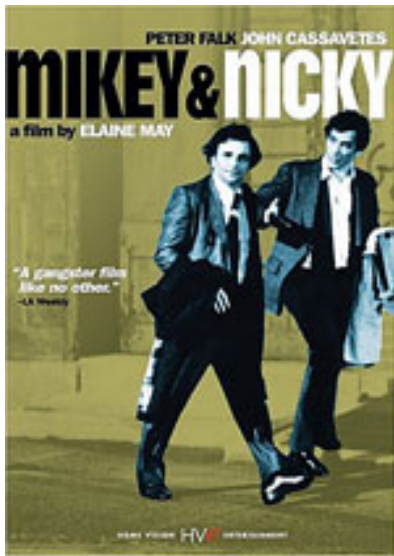
by [Jake Euker](#)











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olidays, flu, moving, a trip to New York, my birthday, and an otherwise complicated personal life have kept me out of the theaters for nearly a month now. While others have been ordering beer and nachos from lounge chairs at the Warren Old Town, though, I've been glued to the small screen, in headphones, screening titles from an ever-growing pile of new DVDs. Below is the first part of my catch-up effort, with more to follow next week. The good news is that a surprising percentage of it turned out to be worthwhile.

All titles reviewed are already in release, and most are available at better retail outlets.

301/302 F3 This strange 1995 mystery about women in adjoining apartments who swap eating disorders (one channels her feelings into the food she prepares and the other hates to eat) is likely to become your favorite South Korean feature by default. The tone of this marginally engaging film is one of comic horror (or usually is — it falters), and the plot is driven by a killing, but its most alarming element, to western eyes, is likely to be some of the dishes served; one entrée prepared with live eels comes swimming to mind. Cheol-su Park directs; the film is newly available domestically in this DVD release.

Blacula F3 It wasn't so long ago that you couldn't find blaxploitation films; their studios pulled them: too P.I. Now the inexpensive DVD releases of these appalling features are like unburied treasures for those of us who love bad film. 1973's *Blacula* is a standout. The film opens with an unlikely 18th-century meeting between Count Dracula and an emissary from the continent of Africa who hopes to enlist the Count's support in ending slavery and spreading African culture; the encounter ends badly when Dracula instead offers to purchase the ambassador's wife and, in the ensuing chaos, inflicts his trademark, life-transforming wound. Flash forward to 1970s Los Angeles where this unearthed victim (don't even *ask* how he got there), now dubbed Blacula,

kills first a gay couple and then all but one white person who has a speaking part in the film. Gene Barry's funky score would be worth the \$10 purchase price, but, for the right audience, *Blacula* offers so much more. It's a horror film thematically, but it's a horror film politically and aesthetically, too.

***Un Chien andalou* F5** November saw the release of Luis Buñuel's 1930 surrealist feature *L'Age d'or*, a film so startling and exuberantly anti-Christian that it caused riots. Now Facets has released the 1929 Buñuel short that started it all. Arguably the most notorious 16 minutes of film ever made, *Un Chien andalou* (the title translates, mysteriously, to *The Andalusian Dog*) is a sustained cry of outrage rendered in images so baffling, poetic, and creepily, repellently sexual that audiences still squirm in its presence today. The plot? You can argue about it for years, but for brevity's sake let's just say that Buñuel and collaborator Salvador Dalí chose not to use one. What they provide instead is cinema's most potent manifesto of the irrational and the surreal. And here's a little trivia for Pixies' fans: this film was the inspiration for the band's "Debaser," an appropriately iconoclastic little anthem/tribute. "Groovy" was the adjective Black Francis chose; we agree, but still nominate "timeless" instead.

***Cleopatra* F3** As the title character, a retired Buenos Aires school teacher whose children have long since moved away and whose unemployed husband has given up on life, actress Norma Aleandro has a birdlike demeanor and an enormous amount of charm. Her sympathetic, open-to-everything performance anchors this enjoyable, small 2003 Argentinean release about a road trip abruptly embarked upon by Cleopatra and a young, famous, and beautiful television actress; Aleandro redeems the film even in its cloying passages, and you find that you're willing, for her sake, to forgive it its predictability and the arbitrariness of its conclusion. *Cleopatra* is newly available on DVD as part 20th Century Fox's Latin Cinema collection. Eduardo Mignogna directs.

***Fighting Elegy* F4** A companion DVD release to Seijun Suzuki's *Youth of the Beast* (below), this stripped-down 1966 feature takes a comic view of the rise of militarism in 1930s Japan. It's an oddity for its director: Suzuki has turned down the style, and he's replaced his hoods-and-strippers content with a period portrait that has a political message at its core. As such, it's not a good starting place for Suzuki, but if you're already a fan, you can't afford to miss it. From the Criterion Collection.

***How Arnold Won the West* F3** "Believe me," says an unemployed actor dressed like Spider-Man who's just explained why it is that California needs Arnold Schwarzenegger as its governor. Like everything else in this documentary about the 2003 recall election that landed the Terminator in Sacramento, though, this actor strains our credibility: does he really know what's best for the world's fourth largest economy? And, if so, why is he unemployed? For that matter, why should we believe that his heavily employed counterpart knows any better? The work of British filmmaker Alex Cooke, *How Arnold Won the West* chronicles the surreal goings-on that marked the most undignified election in modern American history, from a slate of candidates that included a porn star and Gary Coleman to the birth of a game show — in which actual candidates participated — called *Who Wants to be Governor?* Cooke has a bias that's too strident and sometimes unfair, but her film remains a fascinating look at democracy at its worst, and it makes a compelling case that the governorship was indeed stolen, as the title implies. The new DVD release includes generous extras, including worthwhile deleted footage and TV ads run by the

porn star.

***The King of Kings* F3** In 1927 it was the final word in screen spectacle, and it was as widely discussed then as *The Passion of the Christ* would be 70-some years later (although, thankfully, its subject matter is the only feature it shares with Mel Gibson's hideous snuff film). Directed by master showman Cecil B. DeMille in his typical three-ring style, *The King of Kings* tells the story of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection with all the reverence he and his cast can muster. While plot details such as Mary Magdalene's affair with Judas (she delivers the now notorious line "Saddle my zebras — gift of the Nubian king!") or the full-scale earthquake that rocks Calvary may startle the pious, the film's screen pyrotechnics were unprecedented in their day, and the picture smashed boxoffice records and played a record run on Broadway. Don't make the mistake of assuming that it's merely quaint today. The Criterion release includes the original 1927 version, as well as the road-show edit that toured the country the following year.

***Mikey and Nicky* F4** Director Elaine May was a pioneering comedian, but her output as a director was limited to four films. The reviews that greeted this, her third, may help explain why (*The New York Post*, for example, called it "an impenetrable, ugly, and almost unendurable mess"); if that doesn't make the case, consider the fact that her fourth film was *Ishtar*. But Home Vision's new DVD release of 1977's *Mikey and Nicky* shows a film that's matured nicely, and its deliberately loose, improvisatory style creates a nostalgia for a type of filmmaking now long gone. Peter Falk and John Cassavetes play the title characters, a pair of petty criminals who spend a long night in Philadelphia eluding a hitman (Ned Beatty); the men's club atmosphere recalls Cassavetes's own films, such as *Husbands* or *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, but May's sensibility is her own, and her comic, restrained judgment of her non-heroes ultimately rewards.

***One of Them* F1** Sometimes it's possible for me to have forgotten almost everything about a movie within a few minutes of having seen it, and I don't always think it's my fault. So it is with the 2004 direct-to-video feature *One of Them*; I saw the DVD, and reading some promotional material that came with it I find that it chronicles the sinister goings-on at a certain Marquez Academy, where, as I recall, a cult of faculty and students worship an evil entity by offering human sacrifices. Alternatively, it may be that this cult only kills those who are invited to join but won't. Either way, I can definitely report that a group of teenagers is involved in a car wreck that leaves them stranded and in danger at this same school. Ralph Portillo directs.



A dissent on *Million Dollar Baby*

Originally published February 10, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)

A

fter weeks of a kind of exile from the big screen, I finally found myself with a couple of hours on

my hands a few days ago and used the opportunity to catch Clint Eastwood's much-nominated *Million Dollar Baby*. I offer two, three, four thousand apologies to my friend and colleague Jason Bailey, who wrote positively about the movie in last week's issue, but I just hated it, and I can't let it collect its trophies without offering a dissent, spoilers included.

At first I thought I was watching a boxing picture, and a pretty good one at that. For mechanical reasons alone, *Million Dollar Baby* seemed to me to be an improvement on Eastwood's dreadful *Mystic River*: the camerawork doesn't jar you every few minutes as it did there, and Sean Penn at no time does a big Oscar-clip grief scene about the loss of his daughter while her corpse breathes steadily on a gurney just behind him.

But problems develop. In its last third *Million Dollar Baby* becomes pointlessly tragic, inflicting pain on its characters that its content can't justify. It's a grave misjudgment on Eastwood's part; it's meant to illustrate a transformation in its central character, but the audience already well understands this dynamic, and the effect of the material on me, instead, was to make me a little angry. This third-act suffering is narrative poison — I wouldn't sit it through it again for any reason, and I think it made others uncomfortable, too — but it's also what lends the film its prestige; a "pretty good" boxing picture, such as Robert Rossen's *Body and Soul* or Walter Hill's *Hard Times*, isn't nominated for Oscars in every major category, and, as such, I don't imagine they're the type of thing that Eastwood would now agree to do.

Worst, though, is *Million Dollar Baby*'s deliberate "decentness." This middle-of-the-road, unexamined conventionality is, I think, what attracts people to Eastwood's films — their admirers see them as solid, "good" films, never flashy, and only pretend-controversial — but aren't the attitudes of *Million Dollar Baby* really just as scary and biased as the pro-gun vigilantism of *Dirty Harry*? Here we have the story of a woman who, through grit and determination, achieves her goal to become a boxer. In this she is aided by an older man who knows the value of hard work, prudence, and decency (he counsels his student to buy a little house in cash as soon as she can afford to), and who comes to stand in for the boxer's family, a lazy Missouri bunch on Welfare. Implicit in the story of the boxer's success is her avoidance of sex (she in fact has no life outside the ring), and in case we miss the message, the script provides, as examples of the fruits of sin, a sister with an unkempt child whose father is expected to be released soon from prison. (The film's primary villain, in fact, is a murderous, cheating boxer who previously worked as a prostitute in politically-suspect Berlin.) The film is narrated by an elderly black man (played by Morgan Freeman, Hollywood's default pauper sage) who knows his place, and who's content with simple things to the extent that he refuses a free trip to Las Vegas, the way a loyal slave, in white mythology, might refuse his freedom in order to stay on with Master. *Million Dollar Baby* is all Hard Work, Honesty, and Traditional Values, and it weaves minorities and women into its family-friendly tapestry with the skill of the GOP, while happily sidelining them; in this story of a female boxer, it is, after all, a white man we're looking at on screen. It's like the Republican National Platform Illustrated; it wouldn't have surprised me much if, at some point, Eastwood's craggy trainer had lectured his young charge on the benefits of trickle-down economics. Even the film's dabbling in euthanasia feels more like compassionate conservatism than assisted suicide.

That *Million Dollar Baby* exhibits an innate jingoism is too obvious to get much worked up about. Its backhanded feminism, on the other hand, is too thoughtless to be believed. The film

never questions a woman's right to fight — even George Bush has grudgingly learned to accept their presence in the armed forces, after all — but it also puts its paralyzed heroine on a ventilator by the end. *Million Dollar Baby* doesn't say that a woman shouldn't try to do a man's job, but it shows us pretty clearly what might happen if she does.

In fact, *Million Dollar Baby* doesn't say much of anything; on the surface it all seems very reasonable, and its political attitudes may exist even below its screenwriter's and director's radars. But that, in the end, is exactly what makes it so creepy. And it's an ungainly, smug film either way.

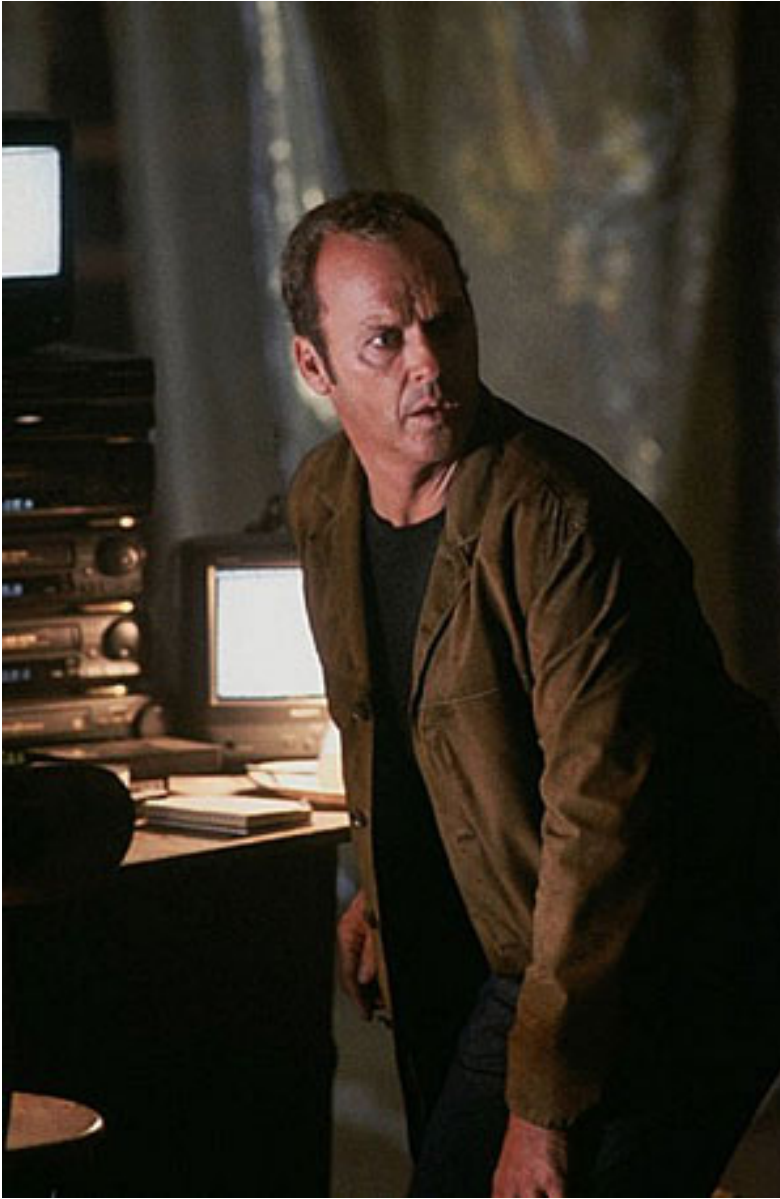
So good luck at the Oscars.



***White Noise* is just a lot of static**

Originally published January 13, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)



SHUT YOUR MOUTH: Michael Keaton sees dead people on his TV. This somehow causes his jaw (and the plot) to lose tension. (Mikey, your next movie about dead people better be *Beetle Juice 220... 221: Whatever It Takes*.)

F

rom the very moment the auditorium goes dark, the new thriller *White Noise* is on the ropes and threatening to go down. You can sense its desperation in its opening frames: a quote from Thomas Edison appears, followed by an explanation of Electronic Voice Phenomenon, a paranormal occurrence in which the voices and likenesses of the dead are transmitted amid the

feedback of electrical appliances that are improperly tuned.

The Edison quote, though wholly irrelevant, is meant to provide vague scientific credibility to all that follows.

In the previews the same case is made through the use of quasi-documentary "examples," although none of this material appears in the film; one particularly hilarious line of dialogue — "It is one thing to contact the dead. It is another to meddle. You are meddling" — unfortunately does appear in the film.

The previews and opening frames had me expecting a this-really-happened atmosphere, like that of *The Blair Witch Project*, but as it turns out, *White Noise* is believable on roughly the same par as *White Chicks*, and its style is that of conventional recycled horror.

The plot follows a successful architect named Jonathan (Michael Keaton) who loses his wife, seemingly in a car accident. A stranger reveals to Jonathan that, through the miracle of E.V.P., his wife is trying to communicate with him; but, as you may have guessed, he takes things too far and has soon brought the anger of evil spirits upon himself and a fellow believer named Sarah (Deborah Kara Unger). Some sort of unintelligible horseshit about a serial killer (I think) ensues, and pretty soon all kinds of terrifying things have happened, and so on.

To me it seemed that the central plot conflict rested in the fact that Jonathan's dead wife used the word "go" (as in, "Go now") rather than "leave" (as in, "Leave now") when instructing her husband on what to do next. (This dead wife, by the way, is a best-selling author whose newest book is entitled *The Eternal Wait*. This struck me as hilarious at first, but not by the end.)

The film finally ends with an on-screen message cautioning that one in 12 E.V.P. transmissions are directly threatening to the recipient; it startled me to realize that the filmmakers still expected us to believe that any small part of what we had just seen was "real."

It's hard to make original horror, but *White Noise* may be derivative beyond the norm. Anyone who can bring to mind an image of blonde, doomed little Heather O'Rourke crouched before the static of a left-on television in 1982's *Poltergeist* understands well enough where this premise came from (don't say *Ringu*), and even a knock-off like 1986's efficient *Witchboard* drew more genuine scares from a similar theme.

The score — in which a repetitious theme is picked out on a xylophone — is so embarrassingly similar to that of *The Exorcist* that, lost in the '70s, I expected one character to shout, "This is for you, Master Damien!" before throwing herself off the balcony.

Instead of horror, *White Noise* peddles the usual goods: shock transitions, bluffs, flubbed shocks, and predictable shocks.

The audience seemed to enjoy it — I heard a lot of young women screaming — but I couldn't stop asking questions. Why is it that the off-station TVs never pick up Univision or *Boiling Point*? Why, following the Scott Peterson verdict, is Jonathan not a suspect in his wife's disappearance until the very end? Wasn't there a character named Julie? Why didn't she call back? And why does Michael Keaton have to stand around with his mouth hanging open all the

time? (Keaton left such an impression on me that in the film's dark concluding scenes I couldn't recall what actor was playing the lead.)

The year is young. Let's all move on.



Anderson rediscovers promise with *Life Aquatic*

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by [Jake Euker](#)



DELIGHTFULLY OVERBOARD: The big budget of *The Life Aquatic* manages to bring in stars and elaborate sets, and, surprisingly, director Wes Anderson maintains his sense of whimsy.

W

es Anderson, director of the new comedy *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, is among the most widely praised of young American directors. You can both see it and not.

His first two films, *Bottle Rocket* and *Rushmore*, were funny, original films, but in 2002's *The Royal Tennenbaums* problems began to emerge. *Tennenbaums* was gorged with novelistic details about its characters, and this information often went unused and in many cases was told — rather than shown — to the audience directly through the film's narration.

The tendency toward increasingly static tableaux that had gotten underway in *Rushmore* was

pushed much further in *Tennenbaums*, so that the film, while always cinematic, sometimes felt embalmed on the screen, the way Barry Sonnenfeld's dreadful *Addams Family* films do.

Tennenbaums had much to recommend it, but its over-conception felt fussy, and its deliberateness worked against the general sense of whimsy that the material suggested.

And yet despite what looks like a bigger budget, *The Life Aquatic* reclaims some of that whimsy.

Like *Tennenbaums*, *The Life Aquatic* chronicles the adventures of a dysfunctional, extended family, one with a glorious past, now in decline.

Title character Steve Zissou (Bill Murray) is a Jacques Cousteau-like undersea explorer who produces a running series of documentaries about his exploits. His wife Eleanor (Anjelica Huston) bankrolls the operation (her family owns the private island that serves as home base for the outfit) while first mate Klaus Daimler (Willem Dafoe) nurtures jealousies of anyone who holds Zissou's attention for too long.

There's also a pregnant reporter (Cate Blanchett), the crew (one sailor seems to be on hand solely in order that he might sing David Bowie songs in Portuguese), and, as the movie opens, a commercial airline pilot named Ned Plimpton (Owen Wilson) who arrives following the death of a crewmember at the hands of a so-called "jaguar shark," and who may or may not be Zissou's long-lost son.

In *The Life Aquatic*, Zissou vows to hunt down and kill this rare shark and to reacquaint himself with his son en route.

In *The Royal Tennenbaums* a lot of the jokes were in the conception; the idea, say, that the dog was run over when all looked safe was funnier than the event when it actually took place.

The Life Aquatic has a similarly full back story — the setup, in fact, is richer in comic potential — and Anderson has balanced what's funny about his concept with a generous number of jokes on-screen.

Murray, loosed from the weak, restrained character he played in *Tennenbaums*, is wonderful, and Dafoe is a creepy, accented marvel. Anderson finds his footing early on — his faux documentary footage, for instance, is hilarious — and a generally genial vibe carries the movie even through its bumpy, unnecessarily complicated third act.

Earlier I mentioned the budget of *The Life Aquatic*, and I did so because big budgets are usually the death of screen comedy; laughs are something that can't be bought, and directors working under the enormous burden of a gigantic budget typically produce something closer to frantic desperation than comedy. But Anderson, hyperbole aside, has a unique cinematic vision, and he may yet prove to be the exception that proves the rule.

In *The Life Aquatic* there's profligacy on view, but Anderson's money buys him leafy touches, too, such as the animated marine life that dots the proceedings or the spectacle of an off-shore marine laboratory — it looks like something from a *Godzilla* film — that pull the film further into

fantasy.

The Life Aquatic is immensely enjoyable, and, more importantly, it reverses the troubling trend of *The Royal Tenenbaums*. It's not a major work, but it's made me expectant again.



F5 DVD Consumer Guide

A quick look at what's playing at the video store near you

Originally published January 13, 2005

by [Jake Euker](#)

M

ost titles now available; some hit the street Tuesday.

PICK OF THE WEEK

Youth of the Beast **F5** This 1963 yakuza feature, newly available from the Criterion Collection, is a typical exercise in innovation and excess from cult director Seijun Suzuki. While his contemporaries earnestly set about making formula features, Suzuki bathed everything in garish Technicolor, indulged in insane camera angles and ridiculous compositions, and amped up his plots to the extent that his studio fired him on the grounds that his films were "incomprehensible." *Youth of the Beast* stands with his great *Tokyo Drifter* and *Branded to Kill*; you couldn't hope to have a better time at the movies.

NEW RELEASES

301/302 **F3** This strange 1995 mystery about women in adjoining apartments who swap eating disorders is likely to become your favorite South Korean feature by default. The tone is one of comic horror, and the plot is driven by a killing, but the most alarming element in the film, to western eyes, is likely to be some of the dishes served; one entrée, prepared with live eels, comes swimming directly to mind. Cheol-su Park directs.

Fighting Elegy **F4** A companion release to Seijun Suzuki's *Youth of the Beast* (above), this stripped-down 1966 feature takes a comic view of the rise of militarism in 1930s Japan. It's an oddity for its director: it's not about yakuza, it's less extreme visually, and it has a political message at its core. Not a good starting place for Suzuki, but if you're already a fan, you can't

afford to miss it. From the Criterion Collection.

The King of Kings **F3** In 1927 it was the final word in screen spectacle, and it still holds a few surprises today. Directed by master showman Cecil B. DeMille in a typically circus-like style, *The King of Kings* tells the story of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection with all the reverence DeMille and his cast can muster. (Plot details such as Mary Magdalene's affair with Judas and the full-scale earthquake that rocks Calvary may startle the pious.) These screen pyrotechnics were so awe-inspiring in their day that the picture smashed boxoffice records and played a record run on Broadway; don't make the mistake of assuming that it's merely quaint today. The Criterion release includes the original 1927 version, as well as the road-show edit that toured the country the following year.

The following list of new releases and reissues currently available on DVD gives our rating of the film, the year and director, and principal cast; full reviews of many of these titles are available online.

Anacondas: The Hunt for the Blood Orchid **F2** (04, Dwight H. Little)

Bad Santa **F5** (03, Terry Zwigoff) Billy Bob Thornton

Before Sunset **F5** (04, Richard Linklater) Ethan Hawke

The Bourne Supremacy **F4** (04, Paul Greengrass) Matt Damon

The Chronicles of Riddick **F5** (04, David Twohy) Vin Diesel

Collateral **F5** (04, Michael Mann) Jamie Foxx, Tom Cruise

The Day After Tomorrow **F3** (04, Roland Emmerich) Dennis Quaid

Dawn of the Dead **F2** (04, Zack Snyder) Sarah Polley

De-Lovely **F2** (04, Irwin Winkler) Kevin Kline, Ashley Judd

Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story **F5** (04, R. M. Thurber) Vince Vaughn

Elf **F3** (04, John Favreau) Will Ferrell

Envy **F2** (04, Barry Levinson) Jack Black, Ben Stiller

The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind **F5** (04, Michael Gondry) Jim Carrey

Garfield: The Movie **F2** (04, Peter Hewitt) Bill Murray

The Girl Next Door **F3** (04, Luke Greenfield) Emile Hirsch

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban **F4** (04, Alfonso Cuarón)

Hero **F4** (02, Zhang Yimou) Jet Li

I, Robot **F2** (04, Alex Proyas) Will Smith

Jersey Girl **F3** (04, Kevin Smith) Ben Affleck, Jennifer Lopez

King Arthur **F1** (04, Antoine Fuqua) Clive Owen, Keira Knightley

The Ladykillers **F4** (04, Joel and Ethan Cohen) Tom Hanks

M **F5** (31, Fritz Lang) Peter Lorre

Man on Fire **F4** (04, Tony Scott) Denzel Washington

The Manchurian Candidate **F5** (04, Jonathan Demme) Denzel Washington, Meryl Streep

Napoleon Dynamite **F4** (04, Jared Hess) Jon Heder

Paparazzi **F1** (04, Paul Abascal) Mel Gibson

Paris, Texas **F5** (84, Wim Wenders) Harry Dean Stanton

The Punisher **F1** (04, Jonathan Hensleigh) Thomas Jane, John Travolta

Raising Helen **F1** (04, Garry Marshall) Kate Hudson

The Saddest Music in the World **F4** (04, Guy Maddin) Isabella Rossellini

Shrek 2 **F4** (04, A. Adamson, K. Asbury) animated

Spider-Man 2 **F3** (04, Sam Raimi) Tobey Maguire

The Stepford Wives **F2** (04, Frank Oz) Nicole Kidman

The Terminal **F4** (04, Steven Spielberg) Tom Hanks

Time of the Wolf **F2** (04, Michael Haneke) Isabelle Huppert

Twisted **F2** (04, Philip Kaufman) Ashley Judd, Samuel L. Jackson

Van Helsing **F1** (04, Stephen Sommers) Hugh Jackman, Kate Beckinsale

The Village **F2** (04, M. Night Shyamalan) Joachim Phoenix

Walking Tall **F2** (04, Kevin Bray) The Rock

We Don't Live Here Anymore **F4** (04, John Curran) Mark Ruffalo,

White Chicks **F1** (04, Keenen Ivory Wayans) Shawn Wayans

Without a Paddle **F1** (04, Steven Brill) Matthew Lillard, Seth Green



Spanglish speaks in television

Originally published December 23, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



¿POR QUE?: *Spanglish* star Adam Sandler reaches across the counter to shake hands with co-star Paz Vega, which is a greater distance than director James L. Brooks reaches with his imagination in this holiday Turkey.

J

ames L. Brooks, director of the new romantic comedy *Spanglish*, started his professional life in television in the 1960s. His first big success was *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and he followed it up with such hit series as *Cheers* and *The Simpsons*, making his big-screen debut as director of *Terms of Endearment*, for which he won the 1983 best director Oscar. A background in TV only very seldom signals a promising movie career for a director, and Brooks' work has largely been the rule rather than the exception (with last year's excellent *S.W.A.T.* being his singular exception). He's a formulaic director and, although the malevolent influence of the sitcom is the first quality that a decent filmmaker would need to exorcise, Brooks has instead nurtured the small-screen sitcom formula for his big-screen entertainments. It's what he knows, and it's obviously worked for him before. Another way to put would be this: Brooks is a horse and the sitcom is his stable. In *Spanglish* he gallops back to it, without a lot of poise, but with a champion's speed.

The plot of *Spanglish* can be summarized as easily as that of *Bewitched*: an undocumented Mexican immigrant named Flor (Paz Vega), who speaks no English, accepts a position as maid in a zany household where no Spanish is spoken. Her young daughter Cristina (who narrates the film despite being absent for much of the action) is the only bilingual presence, and the core of

the film deals with Flor's efforts to overcome this language barrier while also preventing Cristina from being exploited emotionally by her employer's wife. (Brooks himself is the one she should be guarding against; he makes a specialty of manipulating audiences through the emotional and physical distress of children, as in *Terms of Endearment* and *As Good as It Gets*.) Flor's native goodness and determination eventually bridge the communication gap within the home, and before the credits roll she's taught all those around her to appreciate the simple truths that have been before them all the while.

The special recipient of Flor's nurture is the man of the house, a chef named John (Adam Sandler) who exists in the shadow of the shallow and gratingly dynamic wife, Deborah (Téa Leoni). As in television, the rest of the characters in the household are identified by a single trait: there's daughter Bernice (Sarah Steele) who's gifted but overweight, a grandmother (Cloris Leachman) who's an alcoholic, a dog that plays fetch unrelentingly as a running gag, and so on. (My notes tell me that there's also a son named Georgie [Ian Hyland], but I had no memory of this character an hour after seeing the movie, and the friend I attended with had trouble recalling him, too. I imagine he stutters, but I don't know.) These characters' problems *are* their characters; in today's culture of victimization, little Bernice is a compulsive eater in exactly the same way that, in a previous era, Ginger was a movie star or the Howells millionaires. Brooks includes them to give his story a sham "relevance," but also because his formula calls for it. Although Flor's moral strength is seen to positively impact the grandmother's drinking, for instance, in dramatic terms her story is simply a subplot to be neatly wrapped up at the episode's conclusion. You could say that *Spanglish* is pertinent to the problem of alcoholism to precisely the same extent that *The Beverly Hillbillies* is, the difference being that, in *The Beverly Hillbillies*, Granny never gets well.

Brooks' small-screen artlessness extends beyond the film's conception and into its look and feel. We don't talk about *Gilligan's Island* or *Three's Company* episodes in terms of how good-looking they are, and there's a reason for that: visual aesthetics are both unnecessary within most television formats and impractical on the sets. *Spanglish* magically retains this functionality and ugliness; it's flatly lit, it's shot without regard for composition, and, despite locations that include Malibu, it has a cramped, utilitarian feel. Other than establishing shots, the film provides amazingly few long views, and in conversation Brooks tends to shoot his actors so closely that every exchange of dialogue feels as if it's taking place in a car. Visually, *Spanglish* is one of those rare films that would look just as good in the living room as on the screen, no compliment implied.

Dramatically, Brooks manipulates the audience; it's a short cut to emotional responses that more scrupulous directors earn through the honest presentation of their material. In *Spanglish* a brave single woman overcomes the obstacles of citizenship, language, poverty, and emotional betrayal to provide her daughter with a better life than her own, and her story is presented to us through a voice-over as the daughter, now grown and applying for admission to Princeton, responds to a question asking her whom she most admires. It's bald melodrama, here made "intelligent," and thus acceptable, through the use of a minority heroine; and audiences that might normally recoil from the sentimental use of dogs and imperiled children for cheap effect are granted permission to cry along. (In *As Good as It Gets* the soft targets were a gay man and an emotional cripple.) It's TV shorthand for real emotion (and real tolerance); you may respond to it, just as you might respond to a *Dawson's Creek* Christmas special, but it's false and one-dimensional, and if you fail

to be angry afterwards the fault is your own.

Much has been made elsewhere of Adam Sandler's performance in *Spanglish* and, as with the cast of *As Good as It Gets*, reading these kind reviews makes me wonder if I saw the same film. Brooks has an awkward way with scenes (his defenders call it "quirkiness" or "naturalness") that effectively undercuts Sandler's rhythms; the director holds scenes too long or calls for outbursts in their midsts or wedges in a final, smartass parting shot. (He even resorts to reaction shots of characters laughing at gags within the film — the visual equivalent of a laugh track.) Sandler suffers from it, particularly in an embarrassingly unfunny sex scene, but emerges with his dignity. Not so Téa Leoni; as the shrill wife, she's completely unmodulated, and her performance is like a single, long scream. As Flor, Paz Vega endures her righteously and semi-mystically, the cultural Other who sees right through our materialism and divines our deeper needs.

Spanglish takes the sloppy sentiment and cheap, once-a-week aesthetic of television and inflates it into an ugly, self-consciously "respectable" film. Like Billy Joel's "classical" compositions, it asks to be taken seriously. But there's not a genuine moment in its two-hour-plus length. The critics are approaching it kindly, but why? It could be that most of the daily critics cover both TV and movies and for them the distinction is blurred, or maybe that most of today's critics, unlike those of previous generations, were raised on TV. Whatever the cause, it's a tragedy. Like James L. Brooks himself, these men and women may be literally unable to think outside the box.



Finding Neverland is lost

Originally published December 23, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



CAPTAIN SPARROW: He's not recruiting kids for *Pirates II*. He just doesn't want them to grow up. But not in a weird way. Maybe.

//

Y

oung boys should never be sent to bed," says Johnny Depp, playing *Peter Pan* author J. M. Barrie in the new film *Finding Neverland*. "They wake up a day older." The film, based on Allan Knee's stage play *The Man Who Was Peter Pan*, recounts with much artistic license Barrie's life in London in 1903 and 1904, the years in which *Peter Pan* was written and the first production of it mounted. In the film version, Barrie befriends a widow named Sylvia Llewelyn Davies (Kate Winslet) and becomes a father figure, or perhaps a playmate, to her four sons; he helps these children to cope with the loss of their father, and they in turn inspire him to write his play. Following their mother's death (which is literally telegraphed by a cough, as it is in Victorian fiction), he and their grandmother (Julie Christie) are awarded co-guardianship of the boys.

As *Finding Neverland* presents him, Barrie is an uncomplicated hero; he's personable and handsome, and his tenacious commitment to not growing up is presented not as dysfunction, as we might see it today, but rather as a magical gift stemming from his creativity. Barrie, the film says, is enchanted and misunderstood; when, for instance, his wife (Radha Mitchell) leaves him, we're given to understand that she's too grasping and insensitive for Barrie anyway. (And these two part on the kindest imaginable terms. "I assume you heard about Gilbert and I," she says, in reference to her affair with another man. [I insist that an educated British woman in 1904 would have known to say "Gilbert and me."] "I'm sorry," Barrie responds, to which his wife counters, "Don't be. Without that family you never could have written anything like this. You need them.") Like many childlike Hollywood creations, Barrie is portrayed sexlessly. An early exchange serves as notice that he and his wife no longer share a bed, and any suspicions that may arise on

the part of the viewer about Barrie's attention to the widow — or her young sons — is preemptively addressed when a fellow member of Barrie's cricket team mentions rumors and is summarily upbraided by our hero. It's ridiculous the man (and the audience) is told; he and Mrs. Davies are the warmest friends and nothing more, and any doubts about Barrie's motives with the children are beneath contempt.

In reality, Mrs. Davies was not a widow during the years chronicled in *Finding Neverland* and her husband is known to have objected to Barrie's attention to his five (not four) sons. Many argue that Barrie and Mrs. Davies did indeed have an affair. Both Davies died young, but Barrie's involvement in their sons' lives afterwards was strictly undertaken at his own initiative, and the clan was troubled enough that Peter, after whom the play was named, took his own life, as did his brother Michael, who drowned himself alongside his boyfriend. And there's one strange biographical fact that found its way into the play: Wendy is not only the name of Peter Pan's girlfriend, but Barrie's childhood nickname as well. These facts don't add up to infidelity or child abuse, of course, but I also don't think you have to be a cynic to wonder what was actually going on. My main purpose in bringing it up is to indicate the depth of the disconnect between the facts of Barrie's life and the heartwarming construction that director Marc Forster and screenwriter David Magee present in their film.

And *Finding Neverland*, regardless of its worth as biography, is nothing if not heartwarming, in a fantastic, *Mrs. Doubtfire* kind of way. The filmmakers' vision was clearly to produce a tastefully appointed, Miramax-caliber tearjerker, one that aspires to literacy via a first-rate cast and material that comes in close contact with genius, and to thus disguise the film's essential sentimentality; and in this their syrupy final product succeeds to the extent that the National Board of Review recently named *Finding Neverland* the best film of the year. But "syrupy" is the operative word here, and there's every reason to believe that Barrie's life, while certainly interesting, was a good deal less maudlin; you're tempted to wonder why Knee and Magee didn't simply invent a hero who better conformed to their dramatic wishes. As Barrie, Johnny Depp seems to be aware that his character is more complex than the one scripted, but unsure of how to proceed. He tries to convey complexity by speaking in breathy, hushed tones, as though a normal speaking voice might break a spell, but he's never exuberant or childlike, as we might expect from the creator of Peter Pan, and his demeanor seems serious and morose. Depp is outlandishly handsome in period dress, although, as a result of a medical condition that stunted his growth, the actual Barrie was only five feet tall and suffered from migraines.

In the supporting cast we have Mitchell, OK as Mrs. Barrie (her accent seems more Australian than British at times) and Christie, adequately shrewish as the grandmother, if not quite authoritative enough; watching her you recall the flower child of *Petunia* and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, and it becomes hard to imagine her insisting on stricter discipline for a child. Dustin Hoffman, in a small role, is relaxed and confident as Barrie's producer.

But in the end this glossy, good-looking portrait is revealed to be a counterfeit; it wasn't J. M. Barrie's story that the filmmakers were interested in after all. *Finding Neverland*, like Disney's *Peter Pan*, is just another cloying Hollywood fantasy. It might have been a look at a complicated and intriguing artist, but it just plucks at your heartstrings instead.

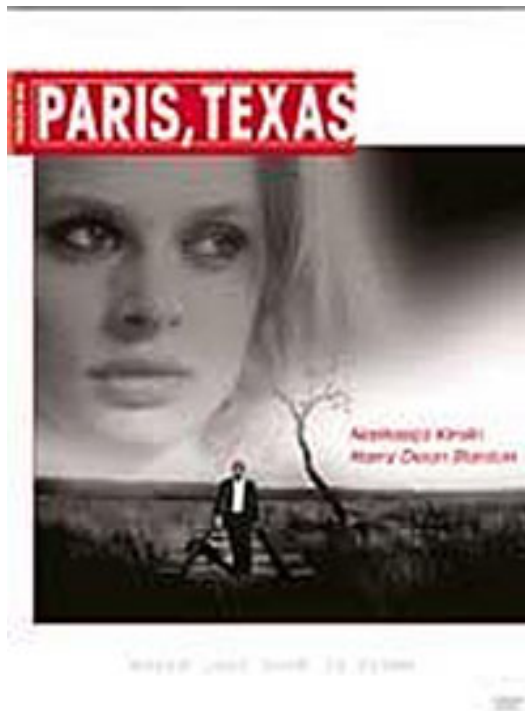


F5 DVD Consumer Guide

A quick look at what's playing at the video store near you.

Originally published December 23, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



M

ost titles now available; some street Tuesday, Dec. 21.

PICK OF THE WEEK

Paris, Texas **F5** German filmmaker Wim Wenders' 1984 American epic about a man who disappears following a separation from his wife was the winner of the Palme d'Or at Cannes and a textbook on mid-80s hip; it's off-beat in the truest and best sense of the word. Harry Dean Stanton stars, with Dean Stockwell and Nastassja Kinski. (JE)

NEW RELEASES

Silver Streak **F2** It's part comedy, part thriller, and part disaster flick, and now that its stars have dimmed there's not much incentive to see it. These stars are Gene Wilder, Jill Clayburgh, and Richard Pryor; this 1976 film places them with a murder victim aboard the title train on a cross-country run. *The New Yorker* deemed it "so inept you can't even get angry"; we remember it mostly as being *long*. (JE)

Time of the Wolf **F2** Director Michael Haneke's surprisingly tame follow-up to 2003's *The Piano Teacher* finds a woman (Isabelle Huppert) suddenly– and violently– widowed following an apocalyptic event the nature of which is never made clear; together with her young son and daughter, she struggles to build a life in a provisional, de-civilized Europe. It's not a bad film– and Huppert, who may be the greatest actor at work in films today, shines as always– but it's a strangely pointless affair. (JE)

The following list of new releases and reissues currently available on DVD gives our rating of the film, the year and director, and principal cast; full reviews of many of these titles are available online.

Anacondas: The Hunt for the Blood Orchid **F2** (04, Dwight H. Little)

Bad Santa **F5** (03, Terry Zwigoff) Billy Bob Thornton

Before Sunset **F5** (04, Richard Linklater) Ethan Hawke

The Bourne Supremacy **F4** (04, Paul Greengrass) Matt Damon

The Chronicles of Riddick **F5** (04, David Twohy) Vin Diesel

The Day After Tomorrow **F3** (04, Roland Emmerich) Dennis Quaid

Dawn of the Dead **F2** (04, Zack Snyder) Sarah Polley

Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story **F5** (04, Rawson Marshall Thurber) Vince Vaughn

Elf **F3** (04, John Favreau) Will Ferrell

Envy **F2** (04, Barry Levinson) Jack Black, Ben Stiller

The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind **F5** (04, Michael Gondry) Jim Carrey

Garfield: The Movie **F2** (04, Peter Hewitt) Bill Murray

The Girl Next Door **F3** (04, Luke Greenfield) Emile Hirsch

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban **F4** (04, Alfonso Cuarón)

Hero **F4** (02, Zhang Yimou) Jet Li

Hidalgo **F2** (04, Joe Johnston) Viggo Mortensen, Omar Sharif

I Drink Your Blood **F3** (70, David Durston) Bhaskar

I, Robot **F2** (04, Alex Proyas) Will Smith

Jersey Girl **F3** (04, Kevin Smith) Ben Affleck, Jennifer Lopez

King Arthur **F1** (04, Antoine Fuqua) Clive Owen, Keira Knightley

The Ladykillers **F4** (04, Joel and Ethan Cohen) Tom Hanks

M **F5** (31, Fritz Lang) Peter Lorre

Man on Fire **F4** (04, Tony Scott) Denzel Washington

The Manchurian Candidate **F5** (04, Jonathan Demme) Denzel Washington, Meryl Streep

Napoleon Dynamite **F4** (04, Jared Hess) Jon Heder

The Punisher **F1** (04, Jonathan Hensleigh) Thomas Jane, John Travolta

Raising Helen **F1** (04, Garry Marshall) Kate Hudson

The Saddest Music in the World **F4** (04, Guy Maddin) Isabella Rossellini

Shrek 2 **F4** (04, A. Adamson, K. Asbury) animated

Spider-Man 2 **F3** (04, Sam Raimi) Tobey Maguire

The Stepford Wives **F2** (04, Frank Oz) Nicole Kidman

Taking Lives **F2** (04, D. J. Caruso) Angelina Jolie, Ethan Hawke

The Terminal **F4** (04, Steven Spielberg) Tom Hanks

Twisted **F2** (04, Philip Kaufman) Ashley Judd, Samuel L. Jackson

Van Helsing **F1** (04, Stephen Sommers) Hugh Jackman, Kate Beckinsale

Walking Tall **F2** (04, Kevin Bray) The Rock

We Don't Live Here Anymore **F4** (04, John Curran) Mark Ruffalo,

White Chicks **F1** (04, Keenen Ivory Wayans) Shawn Wayans



La Dolce Vita a wild, important classic

Originally published December 16, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



ITALIAN PLAYER: Any film that gets a former Miss Sweden to frolic in an Italian fountain is OK in our book, but Federico Fellini's 1960 classic back on the big screen is a must-see.

I

t can be hard to tell it today, but the critical ecstasy that greeted Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* in 1960 wasn't exactly universal. Damn near: the picture took both the Palme d'Or at Cannes and the Oscar for Best Foreign Film, and in film references and textbooks it's spoken of with a kind of rapturous piety. But a few critics expressed what amounted to heretical doubts at the time (a memorable example is Pauline Kael's review, titled "The Come-Dressed-as-the-Sick-Soul-of-Europe Parties"), and these doubts all were based on the perceived disingenuousness of the film's cautionary content. Fellini, in *La Dolce Vita*, said that the fast fixes of celebrity, decadence, and scandal had replaced society's truly valuable undertakings among Europe's privileged classes. These critics held that at best Fellini's seductive style undercut the impact of his message and that at worst it actively contradicted it.

The seductiveness of this style is what no one argued. *This* writer first saw the film at age 15, and to say that I was prepared to move, that same evening, into the perpetual nightclub of Fellini's Eternal City is to understate my enthusiasm by miles. The princes, heiresses, models, screen stars, dancers, duchesses, poets, prostitutes, and freaks that populate *La Dolce Vita* never sleep or work or, with one specious exception, care for families. Rather, they're cut adrift in a world

without obligations or concerns, a self-contained cult of fame and beauty prowling the streets and villas of a nighttime Roman carnival that never ends. What 15-year-old boy mired in Goddard, Kansas, wouldn't prefer that? Fellini's high-artifice style indulges rather than chastens this narcissistic parade. On the screen, decadence always looks like a lot of fun, and there's not much in his approach to contradict it.

An easy way out of the dilemma Fellini provides in *La Dolce Vita* is to capitulate, and watching the film on the big screen in its re-release last week I was tempted to do just that. It reels you in from its opening scenes. This story of a journalist named Marcello (played by Marcello Mastroianni) episodically recounts his adventures in the company of European celebrities about whom he is ostensibly reporting (although he's just as likely to sleep with them), and about the internal struggles he faces in balancing this "sweet life" with that of a traditional life with his troubled fiancée (Yvonne Furneaux).

But this plot serves more as a taking-off point for Fellini's (often breathtaking) set pieces than as a traditional narrative. The film opens, for instance, with the unforgettable image of a helicopter making its way to the Vatican with an enormous statue of Jesus dangling from it by ropes. As this marvel passes over an apartment building, a trio of bikini-clad beauties jump up from their sunbathing, waving animatedly and shouting, "Ciao, Jesus!" and our hero, following in a second helicopter, yells down for their phone numbers and is thus introduced. A marvelous sequence follows in which Marcello follows an attractive and wealthy woman (Anouk Aimée, whom it's always a pleasure to see) into the flooded, basement apartment of a prostitute, on whose bed they guiltily tryst. Later there's a justly famed sequence in which a starlet (surprisingly well played by former Miss Sweden Anita Ekberg) bathes in a public fountain, and later still a wonderful passage in which a media frenzy is created when children claim to have seen an apparition of the Virgin Mary. It's candy of the most refined sort, and the sugar rush soon follows. The problem is that Fellini is telling you it's a meal.

La Dolce Vita is a milestone film, regardless of where you fall on the issue of its usefulness as a document of the decline of Western Civilization. It was instrumental in opening up an American market for European film, and the licentiousness of this and other imports helped to close the doors of the Hays Office in 1966, decades after it had begun imposing its strict censorship on American films. This film truly made Fellini an international star, and those of us who love *8 1/2* and *Amarcord* without reservation have that to be thankful for. (The downside here is the decline of the late '70s and the '80s: *Fellini's Casanova*, *City of Women*, *Ginger and Fred*, and so on.) And this film gave us the word "paparazzi," coined after a character named Paparazzo ("paparazzi" is the plural) who ruthlessly pursues Rome's beautiful people, camera in hand, with the object of getting rich off of their photos.

The spectacle of *La Dolce Vita* intoxicated the 15-year-old me, and it has amazed me many times since; my heart wants to tell you that it's a great film, but my head fights it. I can settle the argument, perhaps, by saying that *La Dolce Vita* is an *important* film and that its joys outnumber its missteps, which are grave. (In particular, a murder/suicide that figures into the plot seemed crueler to me — and more facile — on this viewing than on any of those previous.) Regardless, Fellini, as much or more than any director, needs the space and sensation that the big screen provides. My final advice is to not miss the chance to see this seminal film in its limited re-

release.



***Birth* only partially conceived**

Originally published December 16, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



MOOD, MOOD, MOOD: Despite the fact that *Birth* nails its atmosphere with excellent imagery, score and acting, ultimately there just doesn't seem to be much there in the end.

Y

ou want to like a movie made with the poise and precision of Jonathan Glazer's new psychological thriller *Birth*. And yet when it's over you may find yourself rummaging through it wondering what there was to like. There's Nicole Kidman's fine performance as a vulnerable woman confronted with the supernatural (she's rail-thin and wears her hair close-cropped, and this, combined with the circumstances of her predicament, recall Mia Farrow in *Rosemary's Baby* constantly) and eerie little Cameron Bright (the child from *Godsend*) as Sean. There's Alexandre Desplat's haunting, effective score. There's the patience and professionalism of Glazer's direction, and, above all, there's the carefully refined atmosphere of bare winter dread in which the events of *Birth* unfold.

But these virtues are, in the end, strangely at large within the film. *Birth* feels so conditional that when it's over, you feel as if there was nothing there.

Birth tells the story of Anna (Kidman), a wealthy professional woman who is still grieving the

death of her young husband 10 years before. Despite this, she's accepted a proposal from Joseph (Danny Huston); but following the announcement of their engagement, a boy of 10 or so (Bright) arrives at her apartment claiming to be her dead husband Sean. This young Sean seems to know things about Anna's and the adult Sean's relationship, and his presence triggers reactions in those who knew Sean in life. Reconciling the mystery becomes more difficult as those around Anna gradually discover that she's desperate to believe that this boy is indeed her dead husband.

Among today's thrillers, *Birth* is peerlessly atmospheric. Glazer (whose previous film was *Sexy Beast*) modulates the film's lighting and locations to convey a constant austerity or bleakness — the streets of New York are shot with dirty snow caked along their sides, the interiors are just a touch too elegantly formal, the trees of Central Park lift bare limbs against overcast skies — and he uses long, uninterrupted takes to build unease, as in the extraordinary opening scene in which we follow the adult Sean on a jog that ends with his heart attack, or when Anna, in close-up, confesses her uncertainty to her husband's best friend.

These are remarkable passages; they're tightly focused and unblinking (but never clinical, as they might be in Kubrick), and they command your attention. They're of a piece with the picture's seamless, wintry visual conception; everything about *Birth* is paced, measured, and slightly removed.

And then the film is over, leaving you to wonder not only *What happened?* but *Why was this done?* It's not a matter of *Birth* feeling unresolved — I applaud the filmmaker who chooses not to answer all the questions raised in his material — it's a matter of the film feeling only partly conceived. This unfinished feel is still more puzzling given the film's willingness to stray into uncomfortable territory, as when Anna and the young Sean discuss the potential of their physical relationship or when Sean disrobes and joins Anna in her bath. I'm willing, as a viewer, to accept this material if it serves a purpose, but in the case of *Birth* what purpose is that?

The cynical answer would be that scenes like those, and their potential for controversy, *are* the reason for *Birth*. But so much talent is on view in this film that I don't quite buy it; I think it's more likely that Glazer wanted to underplay his hand — to not state too much and to leave an enigma at the film's end — and that he went too far. It's hard to recommend *Birth* to casual moviegoers, although those with a deeper commitment might take an interest in it. As for me, I'm anxious to see where this director goes.



***F5* DVD Consumer Guide**

A quick look at what's playing at the video store near you

Originally published December 16, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)

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ost titles now available; some street Tuesday, Dec. 14.

PICK OF THE WEEK

M F5 Based on the life of Dusseldorf child murderer Peter Kurten, this early talkie from German director Fritz Lang remains the best and most terrifying film about a serial killer ever made. At its core resides a sinister, whistling Peter Lorre; with his rasping speech, panicked smiles, and buggy looks of menace, he remains the very incarnation of evil on the silver screen. A top-tier masterpiece. (JE)

NEW RELEASES

***I Drink Your Blood* F3** Quick: name your favorite movie about Satanist hippies on acid with rabies. You may not know it yet, but *I Drink Your Blood* is it. Made on the cheap in 1970, this drive-in feature extraordinaire provides many more thrills — and much more genuine suspense — than the title and synopsis might imply. And yeah, there are a few inadvertent laughs as well. Fans of the genre are urged to contract... er, obtain this one; if you don't want it, you know who you are. David Durston directs. (JE)

The following list of new releases and reissues currently available on DVD gives our rating of the film, the year and director, and principal cast; full reviews of many of these titles are available online.

***Before Sunset* F5** (04, Richard Linklater) Ethan Hawke

***The Bourne Supremacy* F4** (04, Paul Greengrass) Matt Damon

***The Butterfly Effect* F1** (04, E. Bress, J. M. Gruber) Ashton Kutcher

***Collateral* F5** (04, Michael Mann) Tom Cruise, Jamie Foxx

***The Chronicles of Riddick* F5** (04, David Twohy) Vin Diesel

***The Day After Tomorrow* F3** (04, Roland Emmerich) Dennis Quaid

***Dawn of the Dead* F2** (04, Zack Snyder) Sarah Polley

***Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* F5** (04, Rawson Marshall Thurber) Vince Vaughn

Three August

***The Door in the Floor* F2** (04, Tod Williams) Jeff Bridges

***Elf* F3** (04, John Favreau) Will Ferrell

***Fahrenheit 9/11* F5** (04, Michael Moore) documentary

***Fanny and Alexander* F5** (82, Ingmar Bergman) Joseph Erlandson

***Garfield the Movie* F2** (04, Peter Hewitt) Bill Murray

***Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* F4** (04, Alfonso Cuaron)

***Hero* F4** (02, Zhang Yimou) Jet Li

***A Home at the End of the World* F4** (04, Michael Mayer) Colin Farrell

***I, Robot* F2** (04, Alex Proyas) Will Smith

***The Ladykillers* F4** (04, Joel and Ethan Cohen) Tom Hanks

***Man on Fire* F4** (04, Tony Scott) Denzel Washington

***Mean Girls* F3** (04, Mark S. Waters) Lindsay Lohan

***The Passion of the Christ* F1** (04, Mel Gibson) James Cavaziel

***The Saddest Music in the World* F4** (04, Guy Maddin) Isabella Rossellini

***Shrek 2* F4** (04, A. Adamson, K. Asbury) animated

***Spider-Man 2* F3** (04, Sam Raimi) Tobey Maguire

***Springtime in a Small Town* F3** (02, Tian Zhuangzhuang)

***The Stepford Wives* F2** (04, Frank Oz) Nicole Kidman

***Taking Lives* F2** (04, D. J. Caruso) Angelina Jolie, Ethan Hawke

***The Terminal* F4** (04, Steven Spielberg) Tom Hanks

***Twisted* F2** (04, Philip Kaufman) Ashley Judd, Samuel L. Jackson

***We Don't Live Here Anymore* F4** (04, John Curran) Mark Ruffalo,

***White Chicks* F1** (04, Keenen Ivory Wayans) Shawn Wayans

***Wild at Heart* F2** (90, David Lynch) Nicholas Cage, Laura Dern





The Motorcycle Diaries a worthwhile ride

Originally published December 9, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



In January of 1952, a 23-year-old Che Guevara set off from Buenos Aires with a friend to tour South America by motorcycle. Both young men ultimately published journals about their considerable adventures — their trip took them through Argentina, Chile, the Peruvian Andes, along the Amazon for a stretch, and eventually to Venezuela on the continent's northern edge — and these journals serve as the basis for the beautiful new Walter Salles film *The Motorcycle Diaries*.

What's beautiful about it, first, is the landscape in which it unfolds. There was nothing like an interstate system connecting South America in '52, and the film, which was shot on location, exploits the lack to present some really gorgeous scenery; the roads these men find themselves on are often more like dirt paths, the kind of rutted byway where you're likely to wipe out, be thrown into the ditch, or hit a cow, all of which they do, a lot.

The backdrop to these small catastrophes are mountains, lakes crossed by ferry, plains, and beautiful South American cities like Cuzco that we don't see much of in film.

It matters for the reason that Salles is showing us not just a travelogue but the budding revolutionary impulse in Che and his friend, and the intoxication of travel is part of what lures them.

Both are medical students — Che is one semester away from graduation, with an emphasis on the treatment of leprosy — and as the film progresses the terrain they move into is more and more impoverished until they arrive at the leper colony where the young men's commitment to change is seen to be sealed.

As Che, Gael Garcia Bernal (*Amores Perros* and *Y Tu Mama Tambien*) gives a good, nuanced performance; his skill as an actor is making him even sexier, if that's somehow possible. Rodrigo De la Serna, as his friend Alberto Granado, is remarkable. Directing, Salles (a Brazilian whose best-known work in the U.S. is 1998's *Central Station*) relies a tad too heavily on the film's narration, and he may be too much in his subject's thrall; when Che foolishly chooses to swim across the Amazon, for instance, Salles presents the heroism but not the idiocy of the feat, and at times like these the film crosses from biography into hagiography. There are too many endings, too.

But in the end *The Motorcycle Diaries* emerges as a touching and memorable portrait of the idealism and restlessness of youth. It's a leisurely, worthwhile ride.



F5 DVD Consumer Guide

A quick look at what's playing at the video store near you.

Originally published December 9, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)

M

Most titles now available; some street Tuesday, Dec. 7.

PICK OF THE WEEK

Spies **F5** Maybe there's a movie somewhere that's more fun than *Spies*, but if there is I haven't seen it yet. This 1928 silent feature by German film pioneer Fritz Lang is still an edge-of-your-seat entertainment today. True, Jason Bourne would probably clear up the film's central mystery in about fifteen minutes, but *Spies* is more about the romance of espionage than its nuts and bolts. In *Spies* the bank fills with gas with the flip of a switch, the last sleeper car is unpinned when the express train enters the tunnel, and Lady Leslane's husband will find out where she spends her Tuesday evenings if she doesn't provide the papers in time. There's a word for it: it's a blast. Make an evening of it, and bring the whole family. (JE)

NEW RELEASES

The Girl from Paris **F2** This 2002 French import garnered a lot of good press both here and at home, but despite a brilliant structure and good performances from its leads, the movie cultivates an obstinate and almost hostile middlebrow sensibility. It's defiant and cold. The plot follows a headstrong young Parisienne who buys a farm in France's beautiful Rhone-Alps. Newcomer Christian Carion directs. (JE)

The Saddest Music in the World **F4** Canadian Guy Maddin is one of the true originals at work in film today. In his early films, such as *Careful* and *Tales from the Gimli Hospital*, a lack of funds resulted in finished pieces that looked and felt like prints recovered after 60 years from the ocean floor; now, working with a real budget, *The Saddest Music* looks just the same. Within the scratched, antique-looking black-and-white frames, Isabella Rossellini appears as a beer baroness with glass legs who sponsors a competition to find the saddest music ever written; teams of musicians arrive in her snow-covered, Depression-era town from around the world to compete, but an unexpected romance skews the outcome. Based on a concept developed by the equally inscrutable novelist Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Saddest Music in the World* will be a good time for some and a puzzle to others. We hope you know which you are. (JE)

Wild at Heart **F2** David Lynch's bat-shit crazy 1990 road movie finds Sailor (Nicholas Cage) and Lula (Laura Dern) fleeing hitmen set on them by Lula's mad-as-a-hatter mother (Dern's real-life mom Diane Ladd). This was Lynch's follow-up to *Blue Velvet*, and although it was eagerly awaited, most everyone (everyone, that is, except the jury at Cannes, who gave it the Palme d'Or) agreed that Lynch was working too hard for weirdness, when all he had to do was be himself. (JE)

OUT NOW

The following list of new releases and reissues currently available on DVD gives our rating of the film, the year and director, and principal cast; full reviews of many of these titles are available online.

L'Age d'or **F3** (30, Luis Buñuel) Gaston Modot

The Butterfly Effect **F1** (04, E. Bress, J. M. Gruber) Ashton Kutcher

The Day After Tomorrow **F3** (04, Roland Emmerich) Dennis Quaid

Dawn of the Dead **F2** (04, Zack Snyder) Sarah Polley

Fahrenheit 9/11 **F5** (04, Michael Moore) documentary

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban **F4** (04, Alfonso Cuarón)

A Home at the End of the World **F4** (04, Michael Mayer) Colin Farrell

The Ladykillers **F4** (04, Joel and Ethan Cohen) Tom Hanks

Man on Fire **F4** (04, Tony Scott) Denzel Washington

Mean Girls **F3** (04, Mark S. Waters) Lindsay Lohan

The Passion of the Christ **F1** (04, Mel Gibson) James Cavaziel

Shrek 2 **F4**(04, A. Adamson, K. Asbury) animated

Springtime in a Small Town **F3** (02, Tian Zhuangzhuang)

The Stepford Wives **F2** (04, Frank Oz) Nicole Kidman

Taking Lives **F2** (04, D. J. Caruso) Angelina Jolie, Ethan Hawke

The Terminal **F4** (04, Steven Spielberg) Tom Hanks

Twisted **F2** (04, Philip Kaufman) Ashley Judd, Samuel L. Jackson

White Chicks **F1** (04, Keenen Ivory Wayans) Shawn Wayans

Before Sunset **F5** (04, Richard Linklater) Ethan Hawke

The Chronicles of Riddick **F5** (04, David Twohy) Vin Diesel

Fanny and Alexander **F5** (82, Ingmar Bergman)

Spider-Man 2 **F3** (04, Sam Raimi) Tobey Maguire

Hero **F4** (04, Zhang Yimou) Jet Li

I Drink Your Blood **F3** (71, David E. Durston)

Garfield the Movie **F2** (04, Peter Hewitt) Bill Murray

Elf **F3** (03, Jon Favreau) Will Ferrell

The Bourne Supremacy **F4** (04, Paul Greengrass) Matt Damon

Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story **F5** (04, Rawson Marshall) Ben Stiller

Gunga Din **F5** (39, George Stevens) Cary Grant, Douglas Fairbanks



The Polar Express a trippy ride

Originally published December 2, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)

A

re people still dropping acid? It seems as though it's been a long time since I was talking to someone at Kirby's or Our Fantasy or somewhere in Old Town only to realize that their glassy look of interest in my conversation was artificially *intense*. In the early '90s you couldn't get away from it; I remember a guy at a bar asking me back then, "Can you pass the tip jar for this band or are you tripping?" I passed the tip jar, but it did make me wonder about oncoming traffic as I drove home. Another time I watched two people at a party having a conversation that consisted entirely of non sequiturs. A key point one of the participants seemed to be making was that a male sibling was no longer your "brother" if too great a number of years separated him from you. It was like experimental dada theater.

All this nostalgia for hallucinogens was triggered in me by the new animated film *The Polar Express*; watching it I was persuaded to believe that in southern California the early '90s never ended. Of course, *The Polar Express* isn't intended as drug paraphernalia but rather as a warm-hearted family feature. But then all the really trippy films — *The 5000 Fingers of Dr. T.*, *The Wizard of Oz*, Disney's *Alice in Wonderland*, and of course the stalwart *Fantasia* are. Based on Chris Van Allsburg's enigmatic picture book in which a young boy boards a mysterious train bound for the North Pole, *The Polar Express* is intended as a holiday classic, something the family makes a tradition of watching once a year on Thanksgiving. But my guess is that it's too strange and abstractly positioned to catch on, or at least to catch on in the intended way.

What's strangest here is the technique, called "captured performance," in which actors are transformed into digital animation with their likenesses and gestures intact. Tom Hanks, playing multiple roles, is scariest: you see Tom Hanks and you see Tom Hanks acting like Tom Hanks, but your brain keeps insisting that something here isn't *real*. (If you encountered a thing like one of these digitized actors in real life, you'd wet your pants with fear, and seeing them in the movies isn't so different at first.) A happier solution, it seems to me, would have been to blend live action with animation, or to stylize the appearance of the humans so that you didn't always feel that a creepy mannequin had come to life in your presence. Was a new technique being shown off in *The Polar Express*? I imagine so; the humans are convincingly modeled, although they tend to appear cross-eyed, and the animation allows them to perform feats a real actor could not (couldn't without animation, that is). But maybe horror was the proper context for this particular debut; it's freaky and belligerently unreal.

Elsewhere *The Polar Express* is a strange mix. Regardless of where you fall on *Forrest Gump*, director Robert Zemeckis is a filmmaker with real ability. (If you, like me, fall on the other side of the *Gump* question, I offer early films like *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* and *Used Cars* as proof of this talent.) In *The Polar Express* he brings a very real, strangely desolate poetry to much of the

material; you respond to the insanely remote landscape through which this train moves, to the isolating extremes of the winter climate and the under-populated limbo of the interiors, but it's a lonely fantasy, the kind of thing we invent to summon sleep. In one scene we follow a ticket that's been blown from the train as it drifts over frozen chasms and glides past a pack of wolves, and the dreamlike timbre of the images is exhilarating. It makes you feel glad that you're safely tucked into a heated theater.

But then this desolation extends into the shrill scenes, and the film's chilliness becomes a little disorienting. The North Pole sequences are filled with legions of lifelike dwarves — the children tower over them — and the effect is less magical than scary and wrong. The public spaces at the Pole seem to have been modeled on Tiananmen Square — they're vast, bare, and ringed with grim buildings — and when the army of red-suited dwarves hoist a star to top a giant Christmas tree, the echoes of Sino-Soviet Communist pageant are impossible to overlook. Even the stateside scenes are positioned remotely; the art direction seems to suggest that the film is taking place during the Great Depression, but the details are conflicting and the timeframe remains impossible to pin down.

The Polar Express kept me glued to the screen (except, of course, during the song, at which point I temporarily bailed), but I'm not sure that it held me for the right reasons. Zemeckis has a gift for action scenes, and there are a few of these that he pulls off with aplomb. And, as I said, I was mesmerized by some of the images. But the strangeness of it all was ultimately not quite *benign*; I harbored the irrational fear throughout *The Polar Express* that everything might go wrong. In the '60s I think we called this a "bummer," and then from the '70s on a "bad trip." *The Polar Express* isn't a bad trip, quite, but it sure as hell isn't the biggest hug of the holiday season, either. I kept grinding my teeth and thinking, *What's going on?*



F5 DVD Consumer Guide

A quick look at what's playing at the video store near you! Most titles now available.

Originally published December 2, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)

PICK OF THE WEEK

Fanny and Alexander **F5** Kick off the holiday season with Ingmar Bergman's most hopeful film. (It was also the director's last theatrical release.) Made in 1982 for Swedish TV and released stateside in a condensed form later, Bergman's final masterpiece opens on Christmas Eve of 1909 and follows a painful, but ultimately redeeming, couple of years in the lives of its title characters,

a pair of young children in a large, theatrical family. The Criterion Collection has released *Fanny and Alexander* in two versions: a two-disk set with the American version and a five-disk set with both. Indulge in the complete set or not, but don't miss the movie. (JE)

RECENT RELEASES

Epidemic **F2** The second film from unhinged Danish director Lars von Trier (he also is responsible for *Breaking the Waves*, *Dancer in the Dark*, and *Dogville*, and was a signatory on the now infamous Dogme 95 manifesto), 1988's *Epidemic* charts the progress of a screenplay being written by two young filmmakers (von Trier and *Epidemic* co-writer Niels Vørsel); unbeknownst to them, an actual epidemic, very like the one about which they are writing, is germinating in the air and soil all around them. It's packaged as horror, but really *Epidemic* is a film about filmmaking, and although von Trier has tricked it out in allusion and some (sometimes witty) cinematic sleight-of-hand, the project feels very much thrown together in the end. (JE)

Jesus of Montreal **F2** This acclaimed 1989 film from French Canadian director Denys Arcand (*The Barbarian Invasions*) took the jurors' prize at Cannes and received an Oscar nomination for best foreign language film, but it's saddled with an unbearably self-righteous hero, and its execution is hip in a self-conscious way; it's the type of film in which shots of the empty, nighttime streets of Montreal are accompanied by an electric guitar solo on the soundtrack and in which a cologne commercial featured within the film is both mocked as superficial and milked for its chic glint. The plot concerns a Catholic diocese that turns to a young actor to spice up its boringly traditional passion play and about the ways the actors lives begin to mirror those of their biblical characters. (JE)

OUT NOW

The following list of new releases and reissues currently available on DVD gives our rating of the film, the year and director, and principal cast; full reviews of many of these titles are available online.

L'Age d'or **F3** (30, Luis Buñuel) Gaston Modot

Angels in America **F5** (03, Mike Nichols) Al Pacino, Meryl Streep

The Big Bounce **F4** (04, George Armitage) Owen Wilson

The Butterfly Effect **F1** (04, E. Bress, J. M. Gruber) Ashton Kutcher

Chungking Express **F4** (94, Wong Kar-Wai) Tony Leung, Brigitte Lin

Cold Mountain **F2** (20, Anthony Minghella) Nicole Kidman, Jude Law

The Day After Tomorrow **F3** (04, Roland Emmerich) Dennis Quaid

Dawn of the Dead **F2** (04, Zack Snyder) Sarah Polley

Dogville **F1** (04, Lars van Trier) Nicole Kidman

Fahrenheit 9/11 **F5** (04, Michael Moore) documentary

The Girl Next Door **F3** (04, Luke Greenfield) Emile Hirsch

Godsend **F1** (04, Nick Hamm) Greg Kinnear, Rebecca Romijn-Stamos

Happy Together **F5** (Wong Kar-Wai) Tony Leung

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban **F4** (04, Alfonso Cuarón)

Hellboy **F2** (04, Guillermo del Toro) Ron Perlman, Selma Blair

Hidalgo **F2** (04, Joe Johnston) Viggo Mortensen, Omar Sharif

A Home at the End of the World **F4** (04, Michael Mayer) Colin Farrell

Home on the Range **F4** (04, W. Finn, J. Sanford) animated

Jersey Girl **F3** (04, Kevin Smith) Ben Affleck, Jennifer Lopez

Kill Bill: Vol. 2 **F5** (04, Quentin Tarantino) Uma Thurman

The Ladykillers **F4** (04, Joel and Ethan Cohen) Tom Hanks

Laws of Attraction **F3** (04, P. Howitt) Pierce Brosnan, Julianne Moore

Man on Fire **F4** (04, Tony Scott) Denzel Washington

Mean Girls **F3** (04, Mark S. Waters) Lindsay Lohan

The Passion of the Christ **F1** (04, Mel Gibson) James Cavaziel

The Punisher **F1** (04, Jonathan Hensleigh) Thomas Jane

Scooby Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed **F3** (04, R. Gosnell)

Secret Honor **F3** (84, Robert Altman) Philip Baker Hall

Secret Window **F2** (04, David Koepp) Johnny Depp, John Turturro

Shrek 2 **F4** (04, A. Adamson, K. Asbury) animated

Slacker **F5** (91, Richard Linklater)

Springtime in a Small Town **F3** (02, Tian Zhuangzhuang)

Starsky & Hutch **F4** (04, Tod Phillips) Owen Wilson, Ben Stiller

The Stepford Wives **F2** (04, Frank Oz) Nicole Kidman

Taking Lives **F2** (04, D. J. Caruso) Angelina Jolie, Ethan Hawke

Tanner '88 **F3** (88, Robert Altman) Michael Murphy, Cynthia Nixon

The Terminal **FX** (04, Steven Spielberg) Tom Hanks

To Be and To Have **F4** (02, Nicolas Philibert) documentary

Twisted **F2** (04, Philip Kaufman) Ashley Judd, Samuel L. Jackson

Underworld Beauty **F4** (58, Seijun Suzuki) Michitaro Mizushima

White Chicks **F1** (04, Keenen Ivory Wayans) Shawn Wayans

The Whole Ten Yards **F1** (04, Howard Duetch) Bruce Willis



Stupid *Saw* is painfully bad

Originally published November 25, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



I BET HE WANTS TO CALL HIS AGENT: Cary Elwes — you'll remember him as Westley in *The Princess Bride* — sucks in *Saw*. Sucks.

S

aw is so vile, bleak, and dismal that I initially thought I was going to regret having seen it; it's willfully, pointlessly sadistic right from the start, "entertainment" that seems to be pitched to young men who start fires or torture animals. The film takes David Fincher's *Se7en* as its clear inspiration, but it's stupidly brutal in ways that *Se7en* wasn't; in no fewer than three scenes, for instance, a little girl of maybe four or five screams in terror in a long close-up as a serial killer drags a gun across her and her mother's face.

I saw that I would be walking out on *Saw*, but then the friend that I was with, fed up with the staggering improbability and dim-wittedness of the plot, started suggesting courses of action that our protagonists might use to escape the film's central predicament, and I found a way to laugh at the rest of the movie. Others joined us. Late in the film, at a completely unknown location, a man the audience has never seen runs into a room and says that the police have been called, and another viewer a row behind me said, "The police have *just now* been called?" Meanwhile my friend was offering helpful insights ("You can't electrocute someone who's chained to a pipe.") and suggestions ("Shoot the corpse.")

This central predicament is that two men awaken in a shit-smearred restroom with no idea how they arrived there. Both are chained, and one has instructions to kill the other or lose his family. It would take twenty thousand words to summarize the rest of the hopelessly, tediously, *stinkingly* bloated plot, and another four to spoil the surprise ending, which I'll now try to do, in fewer words, anyway: the surprise ending of *Saw* requires that a man in a latex face mask play dead for something like seven hours on the floor between the two men who are chained to opposite walls of the restroom and who spend those seven hours talking to one another over this fake corpse in good lighting. Because this man is also the mastermind of this labyrinthine torture — also involved are the young girl and her mother, a rogue cop, another victim, and so on, all at

different locations — he must also somehow oversee the proceedings, not to mention deliver the science-defying electric shocks described above. It's an insult to be asked to buy it, and in *Saw* it never ends. Watching it, your disbelief rises first off the chart and then off the fucking wall.

Compared to sitting through *Saw*, this fake dead guy has an easy job. The film is insanely long, with an hour or more of virtually irrelevant plot and a minimum of eight extraneous characters, and its flashback structure is one long, unendurable frustration. (In one scene, one of the captives says that he's remembering the last words he said to his daughter; we then go to flashback to relive this tender exchange, and when we rejoin the two in the restroom something like an hour has passed on the clock on the wall. If I had made the movie, the other guy would've been sleeping.) The narrative integrity is such that the audience seldom understands the exact timeframe of the action it's viewing, and the killer, once unmasked, has to be identified, via flashback, to an audience who has no memory of who he is. One of the shackled men left a hotel the night before, and the audience watches the same footage of him walking to his car *four different times*. I wanted to shout "Cut!" out loud. In fact, I did.

But wait, there's more. As one of the captives, a doctor named Lawrence, Cary Elwes is *spectacularly* bad; I mean that you really almost can't believe it. The director may have had a hand in this: although Elwes is probably an appropriate age to be playing an oncologist with a wife and young child, he wears makeup intended to age him, and he behaves with the fakest imaginable adult authority, like a high school boy who's been cast as Abraham Lincoln in a high school pageant commemorating Presidents' Day. He's given lines to deliver such as, "I thought I was alone, but I was sure someone else was there," and he howls hilariously at the end while cutting his own foot off with a hacksaw. Danny Glover, as the rogue cop, gets to deliver the old chestnut "Who said anything about a search warrant?" (a note to any potentially rogue cops reading this: a search warrant would have prevented everything in the film from taking place) and in one scene he runs around a warehouse (*each* location — each and every one save possibly a hospital — might pass as a warehouse) with his neck cut open from ear to ear, gurgling.

James Wan directed this movie; it was written by Leigh Whannell, and the two developed the reams of "story" together, possibly working over the course of decades. It was shot murkily by David A. Armstrong, and condescendingly edited by Kevin Greutert. Earlier I said that I laughed at *Saw*, but it's not the kind of thing you can recommend on a dare for its camp value — it's far too mean and too insultingly implausible and too dumb. "At least we can say that we saw *Saw*," I offered my friend on a drive home during which he pointed out another plot inconsistency or overlooked resolution at a rate of better than two a mile. "We can say we saw *through Saw*," he said.



***Seed of Chucky* is either brave or stupid**

Originally published November 18, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



TOO STRANGE?: We don't often say things like this, but *Seed of Chucky* may just be too strange for its own good, with bizzare fictional (maybe) self-references and "just kidding" carnage.

T

he *Child's Play* franchise has grown in unexpected, self-aware ways in the 14 years since the iffy original, but the latest sequel, *Seed of Chucky*, is so freaking weird that I didn't quite know what to make of it.

I don't mean to say that it's merely ornately grisly — which it sometimes is — or that it's merely self-mocking, the way that *Bride of Chucky* was. I mean that it ventures into some very strange narrative territory; it obliterates a few filmmaking norms that are in place for audience comfort. Does it work? Marginally, the way that *Adaptation.* did. *Seed of Chucky* held my attention, but I've got to say that I was also glad to have it end.

Strangest of all the aberrations in *Seed of Chucky* — and this is a film where the original Chucky kills Britney Spears and where John Waters, director of *Pink Flamingos*, photographs a doll that is jerking off more or less onscreen — is its treatment of its star, Jennifer Tilly.

The plot, which I won't bother trying to synopsise, is structured so that Tilly appears as an actress appearing in a film about Chucky. (She also voices Chucky's bride Tiffany, as she has done in the past.) Her character name is Jennifer Tilly, and she's scripted as a washed-up bitch who's described as being fat (she isn't), who gobbles down Mr. Goodbars surreptitiously, who complains that despite an Oscar nomination she's doing cheap horror, and who cynically sleeps with a rap star (Redman, playing Redman) in order to land a role as the Virgin Mary in an upcoming biblical effort he's slated to direct. Tilly falls victim to the original dolls (she's impregnated by Chucky via turkey baster), and her likable boyfriend and assistant are

gruesomely murdered by same.

All this is either very brave or very stupid for Tilly. She's a very appealing actress — remember how she stole *The Getaway* from its leads? — and her work in the past has seemed intelligent. *Seed of Chucky* is not especially intelligent, and her complicity in it makes her seem just as stupid as the proceedings. As to her appeal, it's a real strain on audience sympathies, even in an anti-hero extravaganza like this one, to be asked to choose between a has-been shrew or a pair of murderous dolls and their androgynous offspring.

In the end it doesn't matter; writer/director Don Mancini has purposefully created a mean-spirited comedy in which matters of good and evil are beside the point. But it isn't a very satisfying approach emotionally, and the ambivalence you feel watching all the graphic, "just kidding" carnage extends to the actress herself.

Like the film, Tilly is sometimes very funny. In one scene, for instance, she walks past a beheaded corpse and, thinking that it's a special effect from the film she's shooting, she nonchalantly skids along the gore-covered tiles in high heel shoes to get to an awaiting candy bar. And Waters is just right as the sleazy paparazzo who stalks the shrubs outside Tilly's pink Hollywood mansion with his camera.

But as much of what connects in *Seed of Chucky* misses. A running gag in which Mancini quotes scenes from other horror films is particularly grating; these homages don't tell us anything other than that Mancini has seen *Carrie* and *The Shining*, and recognizing them as quotations isn't funny, either. If you laugh at them aren't you really only saying that you've seen the same films?

Chucky's seed, by the way, is a tormented young doll working as a ventriloquist's dummy in England who sees his parents on television and gets himself to Hollywood to meet them and to have the family he longs for at last. This doll's name is either Glen or Glenda, depending on whether it's a boy or a girl (and that issue goes pretty much unresolved).

Despite all the problems I had with the tone of the film, I enjoyed a lot of it, particularly when Glen(da) goes a little mad towards the end.

Seed of Chucky was a puzzle for me. I admired its look and surreal atmosphere and found parts of it genuinely funny, but its basic stupidity and weird amorality kept throwing me out.

And what to make of Jennifer Tilly's bizarre characterization? Is she sleeping with *this* director? It'll be interesting to see where her career goes from here.



F5 DVD Consumer Guide

A quick look at what's playing at the video store near you

Originally published November 18, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#) and [Jason Bailey](#)

M

ost titles now available; some street Tuesday, Nov. 23.

PICK OF THE WEEK

*L'Age d'or***F5** This surrealist call-to-arms was directed by Luis Buñuel and co-written by Salvador Dali; audiences at its 1930 Paris premiere, reacting to its blasphemous, perplexing, and deliberately pornographic content, came close to actually destroying the theater where it played. Seventy years later, it remains one of film's most potent and impassioned cries of rage and opposition, and one of the key artistic achievements of an art form. Sublime. (JE)

RECENT RELEASES

*Secret Honor***F3** Robert Altman's 1984 record of Philip Baker Hall's tour de force performance as President Richard Nixon in the one-man play *Secret Honor*. The action occurs in the president's study on a single, drunken evening not long after his resignation and pardon; Nixon is dictating his defense to an imaginary judge and a phantom jury that seems to comprise the American public in its entirety. Many of the pleasures we associate with Altman are missing: no ensemble cast, no improvisation, and none of his trademark humor. But those with an interest in theater are directed to *Secret Honor* all the same. (JE)

*Tanner '88***F3** Originally a limited-run series for HBO, *Tanner '88* chronicles the failed presidential bid of fictional Michigan congressman Jack Tanner from the New Hampshire primary through the Democratic National Convention. The series, which was directed by Robert Altman and written by *Doonesbury* cartoonist Garry Trudeau, ran for eleven episodes, incorporating actual events from the 1988 presidential campaigns. It's often bitingly funny (and disorienting, too, as when real candidates such as Bob Dole appear before Altman's cameras), but its "mockumentary" tone is uneven: it never finds a balance between real and make-believe. A new two-disk set contains the entire season, with newly filmed interviews of major characters. (JE)

*Underworld Beauty***F4** Everything about this 1958 Seijun Suzuki action film is cool: the hip, Bernard Herrmann-inflected score; the glistening, rain-wet, black-and-white cinematography; the film noir conventions and tough guy hero; the '60s chic costumes — even the freaking font in the opening *titles*. Why fight it? Suzuki's urban yakuza tales are among the most outrageously enjoyable films to emerge from post-war Japan (his more famous titles include *Tokyo Drifter* and *Branded to Kill*), and *Underworld Beauty* is, well, a *beauty* to stand near the best of them. Enjoy! (JE)

OUT NOW

The following list of new releases and reissues currently available on DVD gives our rating of the film, the year and director, and principal cast.

Angels in America **F5** (03, Mike Nichols) Al Pacino, Meryl Streep

The Battle of Algiers **F5** (65, Gillo Pontecorvo)

The Big Bounce **F4** (04, George Armitage) Owen Wilson

The Butterfly Effect **F1** (04, E. Bress, J. M. Gruber) Ashton Kutcher

The China Syndrome **F3** (79, James Bridges) Jane Fonda

TChungking Express **F4** (94, Wong Kar-Wai) Tony Leung, Brigitte Lin

Cold Mountain **F2** (03, Anthony Minghella) Nicole Kidman, Jude Law

The Day After Tomorrow **F3** (04, Roland Emmerich) Dennis Quaid

Dawn of the Dead **F2** (04, Zack Snyder) Sarah Polley

Dogville **F1** (04, Lars van Trier) Nicole Kidman

The Dreamers **F3** (03, Bernardo Bertolucci) Michael Pitt

Eyes without a Face **F5** (59, Georges Franju) Pierre Brasseur

Fahrenheit 9/11 **F5** (04, Michael Moore) documentary

The Girl Next Door **F3** (04, Luke Greenfield) Emile Hirsch

Godsend **F1** (04, Nick Hamm) Greg Kinnear, Rebecca Romijn-Stamos

Happy Together **F5** (Wong Kar-Wai) Tony Leung

Hellboy **F2** (04, Guillermo del Toro) Ron Perlman, Selma Blair

Hidalgo **F2** (04, Joe Johnston) Viggo Mortensen, Omar Sharif

A Home at the End of the World **F4** (04, Michael Mayer) Colin Farrell

Home on the Range **F4** (04, W. Finn, J. Sanford) animated

Jersey Girl **F3** (04, Kevin Smith) Ben Affleck, Jennifer Lopez

Kill Bill: Vol. 2 **F5** (04, Quentin Tarantino) Uma Thurman
The Ladykillers **F4** (04, Joel and Ethan Cohen) Tom Hanks
Laws of Attraction **F3** (04, P. Howitt) Pierce Brosnan, Julianne Moore
Man on Fire **F4** (04, Tony Scott) Denzel Washington
Mean Girls **F3** (04, Mark S. Waters) Lindsay Lohan
Mulan **F3** (98, T. Bancroft, B. Cook) animated
The Passion of the Christ **F1** (04, Mel Gibson) James Cavaziel
The Punisher **F1** (04, Jonathan Hensleigh) Thomas Jane
Scooby Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed **F3** (04, R. Gosnell)
Secret Window **F2** (04, David Koepp) Johnny Depp, John Turturro
The Shawshank Redemption **F1** (94, Frank Darabont) Tim Robbins
Shrek 2 **F4** (04, A. Adamson, K. Asbury) animated
Slacker **F5** (91, Richard Linklater)
Starsky & Hutch **F4** (04, Tod Phillips) Owen Wilson, Ben Stiller
Stepford Wives **F2** (04, Frank Oz) Nicole Kidman
Taking Lives **F2** (04, D. J. Caruso) Angelina Jolie, Ethan Hawke
To Be and To Have **F4** (02, Nicolas Philibert) documentary
Twisted **F2** (04, Philip Kaufman) Ashley Judd, Samuel L. Jackson
White Chicks **F1** (04, Keenen Ivory Wayans) Shawn Wayans
The Whole Ten Yards **F1** (04, Howard Duetch) Bruce Willis



Handsome *Alfie* strains its charisma

Originally published November 11, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



CHARMING THE MASSES: Jude Law has a hard time convincing us that he needs to fast talk the ladies to charm them.

F

or the past of couple years I've been telling people that my favorite song is Dionne Warwick's version of "Alfie." Before you offer to set me up with this guy you know who's a terrific dancer and who used to be a buyer for Sheplers, let me offer the self-defense that my favorite *band* is The Fall. OK? So while I'm not necessarily the gayest man on Earth, that little bit of "Alfie" trivia maybe does place me within the demographic prone to the kind of charm Jude Law has to offer in the title role of the *Alfie* remake in theaters now.

It's not hard work to find Law handsome or enchanting, but it's hard work to convey those qualities, especially, I would think, in a role where your character consists of charm and nothing else, and where the entire picture lives and dies on your success. It must make this harder still that in *Alfie* probably a third or more of Law's lines are addressed directly to the audience. It's one thing to charm Marisa Tomei in person and quite another to charm unseen masses while talking to a camera.

What I'm leading up to here is the bad news: Law's looks are certainly adequate to the task of carrying *Alfie*, but his charisma feels strained.

I was reminded of his performance as the robot in *A.I.* whose job it was to provide women with pleasure; there he literally turned his sex appeal on and off as needed, and although being alluring was his *raison d'être*, it was an artificial, preprogrammed allure.

In *Alfie* Law is programmed for sexiness in another way: he's scripted. Acting sexy comes naturally to Law, but the screenplay (by director Charles Shyer and Elaine Pope) piles on the charm so heavily that it feels just as robotic as it did in *A.I.*

Law may seem like a natural fit as the womanizing cad Alfie Elkins, but is he? It could be that a

man with Law's effortless magnetism is exactly wrong. I think that the audience reads his innate appeal right through all the winks and dimples and wonders why such a man would need a lot of bullshit to land a girl.

Law's charm must have succeeded to some extent in that I'm reluctant to blame him for the failure of *Alfie*.

The 1966 version on which this is based starred Michael Caine as the same marginally well-meaning yet conscienceless playboy who has a knack for meeting "birds" but an aversion to commitment; in both movies a few sobering episodes lead Alfie to the life lesson that Dionne Warwick sings about in the theme song — that "love" is the proper answer to the question "What's it all about?"

The first *Alfie* was a runaway hit — due largely its racy content — and the film made Michael Caine a major star (and I hasten to point out that at no time did Caine have Law's spectacular looks or easy charm).

What the remake has is a lot of glossy, candy-colored surfaces — shots of rain-streaked windows, beautiful people on Vespas, block-lettered billboards, and red and pink sheets — and a soundtrack of pop songs as carefully hip as one of those Banana Republic CD compilations available at the registers. It's easy to look at, but it has no depth at all, and before long its smart, bright images become unendurable, as though someone had taken a commercial for 1-800-FLOWERS and stretched it out to feature length.

And to Joss Stone falls the unenviable task of reinterpreting the title song for a new generation. It plays in weird snippets over the Paramount logo at the film's beginning, and it mostly had the effect of making me long for the original. And while I wouldn't trade Jude Law for Michael Caine, I would swap their *performances*. Everything, in fact, about the new *Alfie* is that way: it looks good, but looks aren't everything.

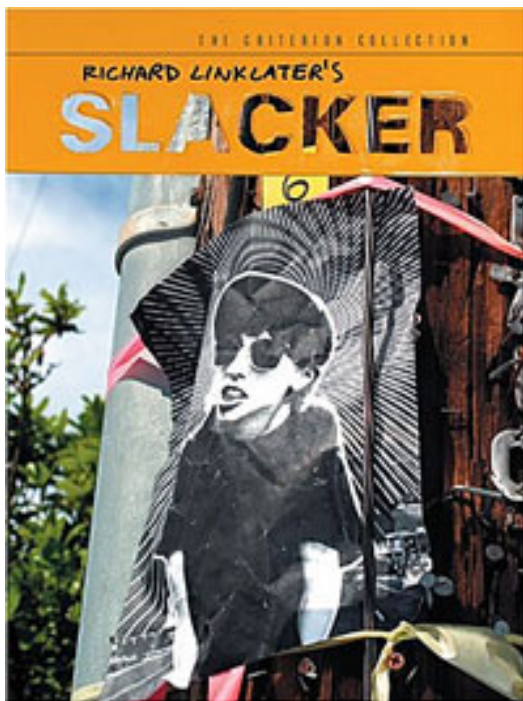
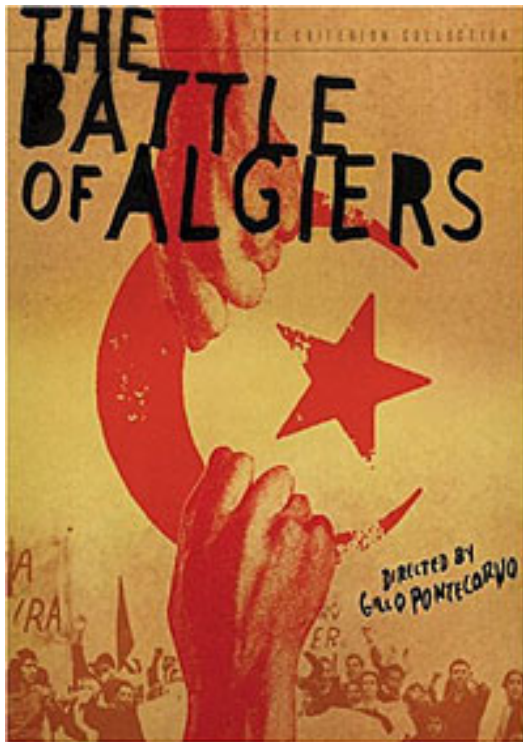


***F5* DVD Consumer Guide**

A quick look at what's playing at the video store near you

Originally published November 11, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



PICKS OF THE WEEK

*The Battle of Algiers***F5** Among the best and most important political films ever made, Gillo Pontecorvo's 1965 call to arms against French imperialist rule in Algeria is a film to stand with Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin* and Costa-Gavras's *Z*. It's extraordinarily powerful, and Criterion's DVD set provides a treasury of supporting materials. A must-see film.

*Slacker***F5** Richard Linklater's seemingly casual, 1991 foray into the lives of a generation of "slackers" who haunt the campus and environs of the University of Texas in Austin — young people who stay in school too long or who drop out altogether, who have women's studies or voice degrees but who work at Taco John, or who have no degree at all but maintain an encyclopedic knowledge of, say, anarchism or the Kennedy assassinations — is in reality a complex reevaluation of the way narrative works in film. The least you can say for it is that it's unique. The best is that it's a landmark and a hilariously funny film. The new Criterion Collection DVD offers a wealth of extras, including a full version of Linklater's rarely-seen first feature.

RECENT RELEASES

*Dogville***F1** It looks like *Our Town* and it has a simple-minded criticism of America at its core. Nicole Kidman plays a young woman in need who arrives in the small Rocky Mountain community of Dogville; the townspeople treat her at first as a guest and then exploit her as their geisha and slave. Lars van Trier (the visionary director of *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark*) draws really specious psychological conclusions to buttress a central misanthropy, and the film's descent into nastiness and violence is juvenile. (For van Trier, it's become tediously predictable, too.) The talented cast includes Patricia Clarkson, Harriet Andersson, Philip Baker Hall, Chloë Sevigny, and, in a wonderful turn, Ben Gazzara as a blind lecher. 2003.

*The Dreamers***F3** Bernardo Bertolucci's 2003 film about a trio of students — an American (Michael Pitt) and a pair of fraternal twins (Louis Garrel and Eva Green) — who ride out the Parisian riots of 1968 tucked away in an apartment where they investigate their sexuality and their love of film. The picture at first feels like a return to Bertolucci's glory days of *The Conformist* and *Last Tango in Paris*, but the film's most shocking content feels appended rather than intrinsic, and the connection between the movies and the real lives of these dreamers isn't all there. It's a compelling, intelligent, but ultimately not quite satisfying piece. (The film's NC-17 rating kept it off Wichita screens; the DVD is available in both R-rated and unedited versions with a featurette about the "events of May" and an interview with the writer.)

*To Be and To Have***F4** This 2002 French release is the highest grossing documentary ever made in that country. Like our own *Spellbound*, the film has a topic that at first sounds unexciting: the day-to-day goings-on at a small, provincial, one-room schoolhouse where the eleven students, aged four to eleven, are all taught together by the incomparably patient M. Lopez. Where *Spellbound* grew suspenseful, *To Be and To Have* retains its low-key approach, quietly chronicling the little moments that pile up to equal a year in these small lives. Director Nicolas Philibert's reclusive, observant style amounts to an act of bravery in today's cinema, and his unerring sense of rhythm and composition provide many beautiful images and sequences; his film has a comfortable, lived-in feel.

ON SHELVES NOW

The following list of new releases and reissues currently available on DVD gives our rating of the film, the year and director, and principal cast; full reviews of many of these titles are available online.

*Angels in America***F5** (03, Mike Nichols) Al Pacino, Meryl Streep

*The Big Bounce***F4** (04, George Armitage) Owen Wilson

*The Butterfly Effect***F1** (04, E. Bress, J. M. Gruber) Ashton Kutcher

*The China Syndrome***F3** (79, James Bridges) Jane Fonda, Jack Lemmon

*Chungking Express***F4** (94, Wong Kar-Wai) Tony Leung, Brigitte Lin

*Cold Mountain***F2** (20, Anthony Minghella) Nicole Kidman, Jude Law

*The Day After Tomorrow***F3** (04, Roland Emmerich) Dennis Quaid

*The Demon***F4** (78, Yoshitaro Nomura) Ken Ogata

*Eyes without a Face***F5** (59, Georges Franju) Pierre Brasseur

*Fahrenheit 9/11***F5** (04, Michael Moore) documentary

*The Girl Next Door***F3** (04, Luke Greenfield) Emile Hirsch

*Godsend***F1** (04, Nick Hamm) Greg Kinnear, Rebecca Romijn-Stamos

*Happy Together***F5** (Wong Kar-Wai) Tony Leung

*Hellboy***F2** (04, Guillermo del Toro) Ron Perlman, Selma Blair

*Hidago***F2** (04, Joe Johnston) Viggo Mortensen, Omar Sharif

*A Home at the End of the World***F4** (04, Michael Mayer) Colin Farrell

*Home on the Range***F4** (04, W. Finn, J. Sanford) animated

*Jersey Girl***F3** (04, Kevin Smith) Ben Affleck, Jennifer Lopez

*Kill Bill: Vol. 2***F5** (04, Quentin Tarantino) Uma Thurman

*The Ladykillers***F4** (04, Joel and Ethan Cohen) Tom Hanks

*Laws of Attraction***F3** (04, P. Howitt) Pierce Brosnan, Julianne Moore

Man on Fire **F4** (04, Tony Scott) Denzel Washington

Mean Girls **F3** (04, Mark S. Waters) Lindsay Lohan

Mulan **F3** (98, T. Bancroft, B. Cook) animated

The Passion of the Christ **F1** (04, Mel Gibson) James Cavaziel

The Punisher **F1** (04, Jonathan Hensleigh) Thomas Jane

Scooby Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed **F3** (04, R. Gosnell) Matthew Lillard

Secret Window **F2** (04, David Koepp) Johnny Depp, John Turturro

The Shawshank Redemption **F1** (94, Frank Darabont) Tim Robbins

Shrek 2 **Fx**(04, A. Adamson, K. Asbury) animated

Starsky & Hutch **F4** (04, Tod Phillips) Owen Wilson, Ben Stiller

Taking Lives **F2** (04, D. J. Caruso) Angelina Jolie, Ethan Hawke

Twisted **F2** (04, Philip Kaufman) Ashley Judd, Samuel L. Jackson

The Whole Ten Yards **F1** (04, Howard Duetch) Bruce Willis

Zero Focus **F4** (61, Yoshitaro Nomura) Yoshiko Kuga



The Grudge fails to hold

Originally published October 28, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



RUT RO, RAGGY: Sarah Michelle Gellar stars in *The Grudge*, a horror movie based on a Japanese original. Hollywood manages to mess it up in all the important ways, particularly with clichés where thinking would have been nice.



T

he new horror film *The Grudge*, a remake of the Japanese film *Ju-On: The Grudge*, tells the story, very obtusely, of an American family that moves into a haunted house in Tokyo.

The spirits haunting this place are those of a woman and a young boy who were murdered by the boy's father before this father hanged himself in turn. The house is thus cursed, and the curse attaches itself to all who encounter it, even tangentially.

Two people die even before director Takashi Shimizu's credit reaches the screen: the first is a teacher (Bill Pullman) who, in a really unsettling sequence, throws himself off a balcony; the second is a social worker named Yoko (Yoko Maki) who is hauled screaming into an attic by the neck. When Yoko fails to report to work the next day, a replacement named Karen (Sarah Michelle Gellar) is sent out by the agency, and before the film ends the ghosts have taken this woman's boyfriend (Jason Behr), several detectives, the American family, Karen's boss at the agency, and even a sister of one character whose only interaction with the house is a phone call she placed to it.

These deaths are shown out of sequence (Bill Pullman's character, for instance, although killed during the credits, is brought back in later in the film, when his story is told), but this complication in the story's plot is arbitrary. My guess is that it is meant to heighten the film's surreal atmosphere.

This surreal atmosphere — achieved through a disjointed sense of time, strange sound editing, and darkened interiors — is *The Grudge*'s best achievement, although for me it was as depressing as it was eerie. The action is likewise strange: the humans who encounter these spirits are oddly passive, or paralyzed, and many of the scares have an inexplicable twist to them, such as a shot of the young boy in which his tongue grows supernaturally large. (Shimizu has a weird knack for cutting away from the most disturbing of these images just as they register.)

These enigmatic thrills are fun, and the audience responds to them, but many more of the scares in *The Grudge* arise from shock cuts. There's even a cat — is it too much to ask that cats be left out of horror movies? — that's on hand to leap unexpectedly into frames, hiss suddenly, yowl, and so on, for the express purpose of startling an audience already primed by rising music on the soundtrack and subjective tracking shots on the screen.

Within the haunted house, a vast majority of the scenes in *The Grudge* seem stylistically looped: they build to a frenetic pitch, startle the audience, and then begin to build again.

It's tiring, but the picture's worst liability is its ungoverned evil. *The Grudge* lacks the kind of simple premise that the *Evil Dead* films enjoyed, and the result is that its characters — and the audience — have no idea how to combat this force that's been unleashed around them, a dilemma made worse by the fact that the evildoers seem capable of doing anything they please.

In one scene in *The Grudge* a woman is menaced by a ghost at her workplace, where the ghost succeeds in dispatching a security guard after materializing in a hallway. The woman escapes to her apartment, where her brother phones her, asking to be buzzed in. She buzzes, but the audience already knows that this brother is dead, and when a knock is heard just seconds later we know that it isn't her brother at the door.

What's the point? Surely this spirit can attain the inside hallway without the benefit of a buzzer; if it's able to materialize anywhere, why was the woman allowed to leave work at all? In the film's conclusion, another woman manages to set a fire in the haunted house. Why? Surely the spirit can attain the inside hallway without the benefit of a buzzer; if it's able to materialize anywhere, why was the woman allowed to leave work at all? In the film's conclusion, another woman manages to set a fire in the haunted house. Why? Surely the spirits could have prevented this; after all, they've just taken this same woman back in time several months in order that she might view the killings. And would burning the house have helped? We don't know.

The Evil Dead came to mind a few paragraphs ago because Sam Raimi, who produced *The Grudge*, first came to prominence as creator of the *Evil Dead* films. *The New Yorker* reports that when Raimi screened the original Japanese *The Grudge* with an eye toward importing the title as a remake, he was looking first for a certain number of "scares per minute."

It didn't disappoint, and his own first two films wouldn't have either. But a lot of what we enjoyed about the *Evil Dead* films is the way they exploded their genre from the inside out, beginning with their simple, elegant premises: these people are possessed by demons, and if you don't dismember them, they'll kill you. *The Evil Dead* briefed you on the rules and then dropped the bottom out from under you. In *The Grudge* there are no rules, just scares and nothing else. The bottom drops out, but there's nowhere to fall.

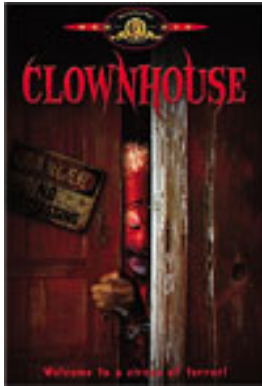


Deeper into DVD

Halloween selections for the haunted homebody

Originally published October 28, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



W

hat better holiday to get off the beaten track than Halloween? After all, "getting off the beaten track" is one way of describing what the kids in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* were up to when they ran into Leatherface, and look what they got — a Halloween experience that those of them who lived will never, ever forget!

So before Justin runs out to the van to get the other six-pack — where *is* Justin? — and Valerie decides to investigate that weird barking sound we heard down by the so-called "Hanging Tree" all by herself — before all that happens, pop one of our off-beat Halloween picks into the DVD player. John, you're not scaring any of us with that stupid fake knife. And Kaylee, for God's sake, lock that door!

Clownhouse Clowns really *are* scary, and no filmmaker ever got that simple principle as right as Victor Salva did in this legitimately terrifying 1988 sleeper.

The Devil and Daniel Webster Based on the classic story and steeped in German Expressionist detail, this 1941 William Dieterle film is the perfect spooky movie for Halloween in an election year.

The Eternal Evil of Asia This Category III Hong Kong excursion into black magic literally left us at a loss for words. Buy it if you have to — you'll want to see it again — or try Thai Binh, but see it somehow. And don't invite the kids.

Eyes without a Face Georges Franju's 1959 French horror classic was banned and censored throughout the world. (In America we chopped out lots of crucial scenes, dubbed it badly, and renamed it *The Horror Chamber of Dr. Faustus*.) See the complete, newly released DVD version

of "the most austere elegant horror film ever made" (Pauline Kael).

Halloween 3: Season of the Witch One of the joys of horror films is the *bad* horror film; in this, our favorite of the horrible *Halloween* series, some scary masks turn kids into zombies. And Michael Meyer's nowhere to be seen.

Kwaidan Four Japanese ghost stories are recounted in this ravishingly beautiful 1964 import. It's stylish, meditative rather than shocking, and so gorgeous as to seem otherworldly.

Sisters The first of Brian De Palma's serious forays into the graphic, this 1973 thriller features a double performance by Margot Kidder and violence that remains eye-popping today. You begin to see why the star went mad...

The Stepfather "Wait a minute. Who am I here?" A great, overlooked piece of psychological horror, directed by Joseph Ruben (*The Forgotten*) in 1986.

The Tenant Roman Polanski's black comedy masterpiece was reviled by critics in 1976; today, in a new DVD release, it shines. Learn about alienation from the expert.

Village of the Damned All the women in Midwich, England, become pregnant at the same time and the kids, when they come, are a lot like one another but not much like their folks. A classic piece of British horror from 1960, newly available on DVD.



Halloween an embarrassment of riches

Originally published October 21, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



CLASSICS ABOUND: With nearly a dozen horror/thriller flicks on various screens from Exploration Place to the Orpheum Theatre to the more mainstream movie theaters, there's probably something out there for just your level of splatter, camp, chills and head games.

A new-
and altogether
different-
screen
excitement!!!



ALFRED
HITCHCOCK'S

REVERENT

STARRING
ANTHONY
PERKINS

VERA
MILES

JOHN
GAVIN

CO-STARRING
MARTIN
BALSAM
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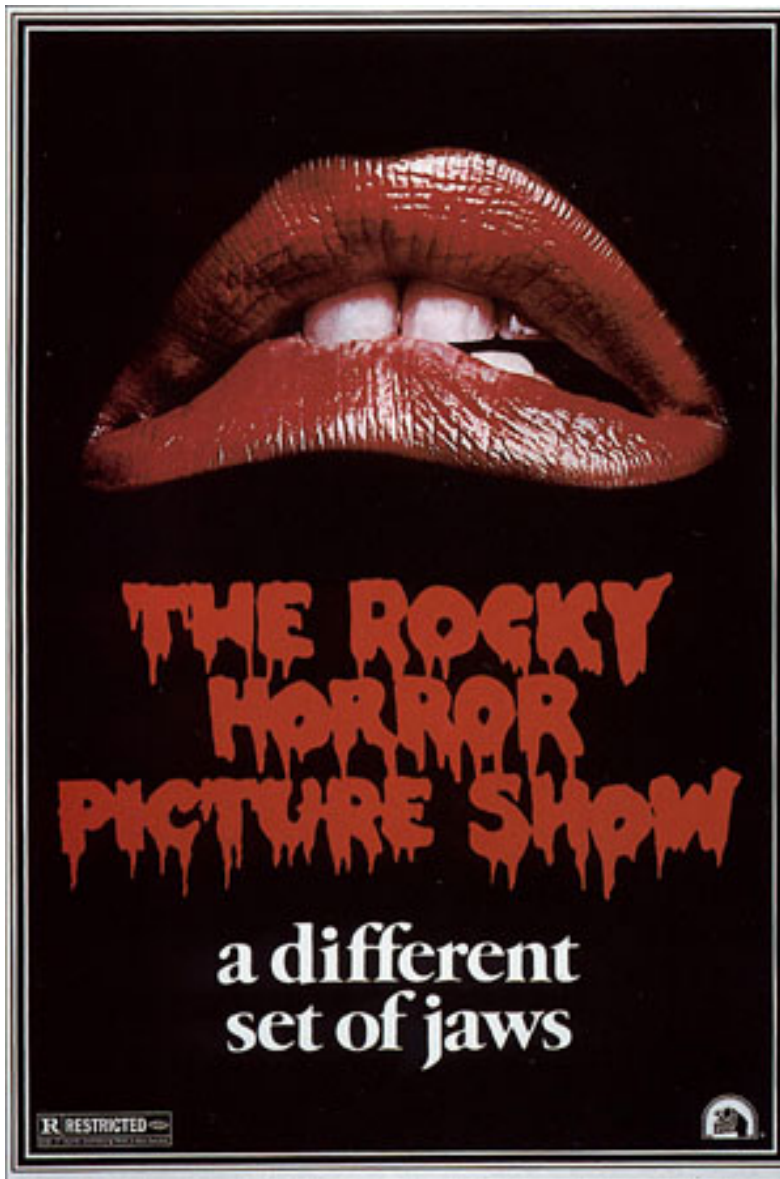
AND
JANET
LEIGH

AS
MARION
CRANE

Directed by
ALFRED
HITCHCOCK

Screenplay by
JOSEPH
STEFANO

A PARAMOUNT
Release



I n Leif Jonker's *Darkness*, which will begin a limited run on Friday, October 22 at the Warren Old Town, this writer, in a much younger incarnation, dies twice in the film's first five or ten minutes. I mention it up front to dispense with the conflict of interest disclosure, although I'll go ahead and brag, too, that celebrated B-move critic Joe Bob Briggs informally nominated me for a drive-in academy award for my performance, which he described as "blubbing."

I was thrilled to appear in *Darkness*, which was filmed for no money here in Wichita 13 years ago, at least in part because horror has always been my favorite film genre. It follows naturally that I love Halloween; it's the only time of year when you can turn on the TV and be reasonably sure of finding a movie worth your time. Lately Wichitans have been enjoying a wider selection

of movies in the theaters, though, too, and this year there's an embarrassment of riches available for those who share my taste for thrills.

(For more information about *Darkness* screenings, see Jason Bailey's [article](#).)

ON THE BIG SCREEN

The Orpheum leads the pack with a pair of real classics, 1960's *Psycho* and 1968's *Night of the Living Dead*. With their grainy, everyday black and white cinematography and horrifying, close attention to horrifying detail, both these movies still pack a wallop today. Even so, it's hard to imagine the blow that both dealt audiences in their day; luckily the staff of the Orpheum has retained a knowledgeable windbag — me again — to introduce the two and place them in context. I promise to keep it brief. *Psycho* and *Night of the Living Dead* show on Friday, October 29 at 7:30 p.m. Admission is \$5; \$4 for seniors, students and military.

Also showing Halloween weekend at the Orpheum is the cult classic *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. This ghoulish musical comedy on the theme of transvestism played for about 10 minutes in Wichita at the time of its 1975 release — it showed, as I recall, at one of the rundown downtown movie houses that subsequently turned into a 24-hour porn theater — before showing up again as a midnight movie at the Pawnee Plaza Mall. By then, unbeknownst to the 16-year-old me, the film's cult had been born, and when I ventured out innocently to see it I was surprised to find costumed patrons throwing hot dogs and water around the auditorium. Now, of course, everyone can enjoy the fun; and if you never have, it occurs to me that Halloween weekend might be the ideal time to give it a try. *Rocky Horror* plays on Saturday, October 30 at midnight. Newcomers need not bring hot dogs. Admission is \$10 (and includes a "participation kit").

We don't take the kids to *Psycho*, *Night of the Living Dead*, or *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*; we just don't. The folks at Exploration Place have thought of this, and they're offering a simulation ride — marginally movie-like enough for inclusion here — that features Elvira and also, if I understand the press release, Indy Car Racing and Haunted Mini-Golf. There will also be a laser ..., er, "cosmic" light show set to the music of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*. More to the point is Exploration Place's screenings of John Carpenter's 1982 remake of *The Thing* and the original 1974 *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. *The Thing* found an audience, but I wasn't part of it, and I'll limit my comments on the film to saying that I enjoyed Ennio Morricone's suitably purple score. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, on the other hand, is a kind of masterpiece, as its literally innumerable imitations have proved, and no matter how many times you've seen it, it deserves a viewing on a big screen at night in the company of others. It's part of what Halloween is for. *The Thing* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* show as part of Frieght Fest II at Exploration Place on Friday, Oct. 29 and Saturday, Oct. 30. Doors open at 7:30. Admission is \$6 to \$12, depending on how much of the Frieght Fest you engage in.

Some of you will have seen all the classics as many times as you need to, and for you the studios have stepped up to the plate, offering a real bounty of horror in first run. I'll start by insisting that everyone see Joseph Ruben's wonderful *The Forgotten*, a dizzyingly enjoyable sci-fi piece with the ideal atmosphere for a fall evening's entertainment. Other promising new releases include

The Machinist, a potentially spooky outing with a good premise: a machinist who hasn't slept in a year begins to doubt his own sanity; *The Grudge*, a remake of an unhinged Asian horror film about a nurse who falls afoul of a curse intended for others; the serial killer film *Saw*; *Seed of Chucky*, another of the tongue-in-cheek splatter movies detailing the antics of the vicious, titular doll; and the Nicole Kidman vehicle *Birth*, which, like many recent psychological horror films, uses a parent/child relationship as the springboard for its creepiness. Also, Warren Old Town is screening *Scream* as its regular midnight movie, along with *Darkness*.

FOR HOMEBODIES

Some of us have already been to so many Halloween parties in our lives that it's getting hard to sort what happened the year we were dressed as Grace Kelly from what happened the years we were Frank from *Blue Velvet*, Che Guevara, an abortion protestor, or Cher. If you decide to stay in, but you're still feeling adventurous enough to drop 20 bucks on one of the hundreds of mysterious DVDs at Borders, I have a couple of suggestions to help you sort your way through.

Home Vision Entertainment has recently made available a pair of crack thrillers from relatively little-known Japanese director Yoshitaro Nomura, and either is worth the money. 1961's *Zero Focus* is a Hitchcockian suspense film about a demure young woman whose husband leaves Tokyo for northern Japan a week after their wedding; he says he's going to conclude some business, but when his return date comes and goes without a sign of him, she travels north to investigate on her own. There she is pulled into a web of intrigue that leads to murder. *Zero Focus* is like the best small Hitchcock film you've never seen; fans of the director will be delighted with it, as though a new film of the master's had been discovered in some forgotten vault in the mysterious East. If the proceedings seem familiar, the atmosphere is distinctly Nomura's; he makes fantastic use of Japan's harsh northern reaches, the landscape of his film — that of a civilization poised on the edge of true wilderness — echoing the tentative hold his characters keep on civilized lives.

The horror in Nomura's 1978 *The Demon* is more direct. Although nothing happens in the film that science can't explain, and despite the fact of the film's basis on real life events, you're likely to feel disbelief, watching it, at what human beings are capable of. The plot tells of a man whose mistress abandons his three children to his care; I use "abandon" advisedly, as this man is not ideally situated to care for his kids, not least because his wife has no inkling of their existence until the moment they arrive at her door. Although this wife is a real Lady Macbeth, the demon of the title turns out to be the man himself; his care for his children diminishes from the neglectful into the actively criminal incrementally, and Nomura keeps us well abreast of the excuses he uses to justify what become really ghastly crimes. In the end *The Demon* is most terrifying not because of what this man does, but because of the extent that the audience is forced to share his guilt through its own sympathy.

EITHER WAY

So, stay in, go out, take the kids, or leave them at home. But whatever you do, take advantage of the opportunity Halloween affords to scare yourself witless at the movies. Remember: our next big holiday is Thanksgiving, and what does that leave us? *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*? Better to tank up now.



Team America is a stupid blast

Originally published October 21, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



BAD-ASS DOLLS: You try to make a movie with puppets and get an NC-17 ... even trimmed down to an R, *Team America* is delightfully over the top.

T

he posters for *Team America: World Police* explain that the movie is rated R for "graphic, crude and sexual humor, violent images, and strong language; all involving puppets." The film initially received an NC-17 rating until a sex scene between two puppets was toned down. Seeing what remains of it it's hard to imagine what was cut, but it's a relief to know that parents can now accidentally haul their eager children in to see it.

This latest offering from *South Park* creator Trey Parker (he directed as well as co-wrote with Matt Stone and Pam Brady) is childish, stupid, and offensive. My friends and I laughed our asses off watching it, and we're a tough audience, too, I think. The film is done in the kind of ridiculous puppet animation typified by *Thunderbirds* — the kind where the characters' hands wave pitifully in front of them from strings and physical speech is feebly approximated by jerking the puppets'

lower jaw up and down — and it lampoons all-American superhero programs within the context of the war on terrorism. The film's primary target is the conservative right — it presents the fight against terror as a pursuit as wholesome, moral, and family-friendly as attending church — but Parker finds time to take shots at the left as well. His is an unthinking, shotgun iconoclasm; there is, apparently, nothing that he takes seriously enough to spare it his abuse.

Team America is nearly as tasteless as *Hustler* magazine was in its heyday, and that was a tastelessness so extreme that it took the Supreme Court to settle the issue of whether or not it deserved free speech protections. (It did.)

For example, the film's hero, Gary, is an actor who is first seen performing a song called "Everyone Has AIDS" from the hit Broadway musical *Lease*. Gary later participates in the hilariously graphic sex scene with teammate Lisa, and later still he's called upon to prove his devotion to Team America by giving his team leader, Mr. Spotwood, a blowjob.

With the exception of Chris, a martial arts expert from Detroit, the Team America members are a squeaky clean bunch, but some of the terrorists say things that you're surprised to hear coming from a puppet; North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il (one of the many real people portrayed in the movie) delivers this representative line: "You want inspections? Then inspect this, you butt-fucking piece of shit."

The brazenness of *Team America* accounts for a lot of what's hilarious about it. (Even the timing is brazen, as in a scene in which a puppet vomits on camera for way, way too long.) But Parker has a weird edge to his humor too, and he's willing to try almost anything that comes into his head; this, I think, accounts for why it is that Kenny dies in every episode of *South Park* and also for the presence in that show of a character who's really a towel.

In *Team America* some of the funniest moments are completely inexplicable, such as a scene in which Lisa tells Gary that he doesn't need to know about rockets to fight terrorists, that everything he needs he can find "here"; she then tries to point to Gary's heart, but her hand kind of wobbles around without pointing anywhere in particular, and the moment stretches on and dies onscreen. It's stupid and weird and exhilarating.

Those not likely to be exhilarated are actors. Parker seems to have developed a real animosity for that profession and he uses *Team America* to spotlight it. At first he does this simply by allowing the other Team America members to take Gary's acting as seriously as he does. (Gary was brought to the team for his acting skills.) Spotwood, addressing Gary says, "You must act your way" into the terrorists' cell and then "use your acting to find any information you can." Later Chris tells Gary, "Your acting was reckless and put us all in danger."

Next Parker brings in the members of the Film Actors Guild (or F.A.G.), who are tricked by Kim Jong-Il into cooperating with the terrorists. Included are puppets representing (but definitely not voiced by) Alec Baldwin, Sean Penn, Tim Robbins, Helen Hunt, Matt Damon, and so on, and Kim has tricked them by appealing to their natural pomposity.

"As actors, it's our responsibility to read the papers and then say what we read on television as if it were our own opinion," the Janeane Garofalo puppet explains.

Later, when the actors are killed by Team America in order to save the world, these celebrities suffer particularly extended and brutal deaths. (One of *Team America*'s real weaknesses is that these caricatures don't have anything in common with their real life counterparts; the joke becomes only that Parker has included their names and likenesses since nothing else about them matches up.)

In the end *Team America* is like a fantasy project developed by a dirty-minded child. Watching it you can imagine a younger, undiscovered Trey Parker thinking, "Wouldn't it be great if you could make one of these stupid puppet movies, but make it where the puppets fuck and explode and look like fairies when they're walking?" Happily, magically, he's now in the position where he *can* make that movie, and we can all share in the adolescent stupidity and irresponsibility of it. It's a blast.



***Bright Young Things* is smart, not smartass**

Originally published October 14, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



LIVES OF THE PARTY: *Bright Young Things*'s greatest strength is the wonderful ensemble acting well controlled by director Stephen Fry.

E

vely Waugh's is the sort of humor that's described as being "lacerating." Before and during WWII, he wrote the funniest literature England then produced, but its humor was predicated on the acknowledgement of social and cultural problems, and it commented on the languorous moral slide that Britain's upper classes were then undergoing. Screen adaptations of his novels have had trouble capturing this tone, tending mostly toward the zany, at the expense of the political, as in 1965's *The Loved One*. Alternatively, they're written with an emphasis on their Britishness, as in the *Brideshead Revisited* films, so that they seem twee or arch or sophisticated in a way that Waugh never was.

Mostly, though, Waugh isn't adapted, or at least not very often when compared to such British peers as Graham Greene or Somerset Maugham. The new Stephen Fry film *Bright Young Things* is thus a pleasure for a couple of reasons: it gets this great writer's works up on the screen, and it mostly does him justice while it's at it.

Adapted from Waugh's *Vile Bodies*, *Bright Young Things* is set among London's privileged classes just before the outbreak of WWII. At the story's center is a young writer named Adam (Stephen Campbell Moore) who, as the movie opens, has the manuscript of his first novel confiscated from him by British customs as he returns from the European mainland.

Like the rest of his crowd, Adam has talent, good looks, a good education, and an honorific before his name; what he and none of the others has is cash on hand. He's accepted an advance on the confiscated novel from the American publisher of a London newspaper (Dan Aykroyd), and the loss of the manuscript forces a postponement of his marriage to Nina (Emily Mortimer).

Peripherally figuring into the story — which is essentially the story of Adam's deepening disenfranchisement — is party girl Agatha (Fenella Woolgar), a young lord (James McAvoy) who writes gossip pieces for the newspaper under the nom de plume Mr. Chatterbox, a childhood friend of Nina's named Ginger (David Tennant) who reappears in her life and threatens Adam's relationship with her, a drunken major (Jim Broadbent) who holds the key to Adam's financial recovery, and various other society figures who interact within the context of the never-ending cycle of parties of which Adam's life is largely comprised.

Waugh created wonderful comic situations in his novels (there's a party in a downed dirigible in *Put Out More Flags* that I'll never forget, and a passage in *Decline and Fall* in which pointy iron spikes are accidentally ordered for a children's track and field event in lieu of the far less dangerous hurdles that were needed), but what's funniest about his work is his verbal precision.

Fry, pulling double duty as screenwriter and director, has done a very good job of bringing Waugh's language to the screen; he captures the frustration and low voltage desperation of these bored party-goers without making them repellent, and he manages the precarious feat of scripting them wittily — of writing them as funny, self-aware people — without turning them into crass smartasses.

But the success of a film like this — one driven by conversation rather than action — depends more on performances than most, and here *Bright Young Things* is an unqualified triumph.

Credit is due to director Fry, who is himself an actor, and who directs his performers with real sensitivity; he gives them room without leaving them undirected. His cast is literally packed with

talent, and as the film moves along it becomes a showcase for some really wonderful ensemble acting; it's like a *Gosford Park* in which the performers are one step further removed from the recognizable. (Local theater and film actors will not want to miss the film for this ensemble work.)

Besides the actors mentioned above, first-rate performances are given by Michael Sheen, Alex Barclay, Bruno Lastra and Stockard Channing. Especially amazing is Harriet Walter as Lady Maitland; McAvoy, as Mr. Chatterbox, is perhaps the only actor present who seems to be working to his own ends rather than working for the group.

Performances aside, Fry shows a real sensibility for filmmaking. In *Bright Young Things* his tone is at first unsure, as in the scenes in which Adam's manuscript is taken, but he finds his footing and keeps it. Even in the film's closing scenes, in which WWII has broken out and various of our characters begin to suffer for their previous idleness, Fry keeps the narrative relatively light-handed; it's too easy to imagine the ways in which a less sophisticated director (or a less sophisticated thinker) might reach to score easy moral points. If, as a director, Fry shows some rough edges — his camera placement is sometimes weird, to use one benign example — he more than compensates with a basic intelligence, one that fits the material like a glove.

Ultimately *Bright Young Things* is a real joy to watch, and its wonderful cast and performances justify it easily. The film does not replace the book — you wouldn't want to skip the latter on the grounds that you've seen the first — but no screen adaptation of Waugh ever could. Like the best adaptations, *Bright Young Things* is a different experience and a pleasure on its own terms.



***The Forgotten* is unforgettable**

Originally published September 30, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



WHAT WAS THAT MOVIE CALLED AGAIN?: Julianne Moore stars in the psycho thriller *The Forgotten*, in which she plays a woman who loses — or thinks she loses — her 8-year-old son in a car crash.

I

n America, screenplays have become a leading cause of death for young people; my guess is that they now outrank both auto crashes and SIDS.

Consider *Godsend*, *Minority Report*, *The Door in the Floor*, *The Village*, *Jeepers Creepers 2*, *In the Bedroom*, *The Station Agent*, and almost any film in which a cop or average Joe takes the law

into his own hands – watching these and dozens more recent titles in which the plot is driven by the loss of a child, you would imagine that the average moviegoer may be wondering whether or not it's safe to go ahead and reproduce.

It works for the screenwriters because any behavior the grieving parent then exhibits is automatically, unquestioningly justified. And it works for the actors– and especially the actresses– because they can then take their performances anywhere they please.

Picture Sally Field. She's angry. Now see her sternly saying, *not without my child*.

The new Joseph Ruben film *The Forgotten* has a similar device at its core, but with a twist: a young professional woman named Telly (Julianne Moore), struggling to accommodate the recent loss of her 9-year-old son Sam, learns through psychotherapy that, in fact, her son never existed at all.

There's proof of Sam's existence, or at least there was: photos, videos, odds and ends, all now mysteriously gone. There's Sam's father, Jim (Anthony Edwards), but now he too claims that Sam never was. Dr. Munce (Gary Sinise) has an explanation for it: paramnesia. But Telly never stops believing, and before long she discovers that there are good reasons she shouldn't.

The grieving-parent premise is the bad news. The good news is that *The Forgotten* is a freaking delight, easily my favorite of all the science fiction pictures to have reached the screen since the millennium turned. I can't think of a comparably enjoyable sci-fi picture since 1998's overlooked *Progeny*.

Ruben, who also directed the supremely pleasurable *The Stepfather* in 1987, has a real gift for thrillers; he generates genuine dread, and he keeps the threat of his material both palpable and eerily undefined.

The Forgotten is set in New York City and Ruben makes full use of what the city has to offer in terms of horror and suspense: he locates action via aerial pans, accentuates verticals, and creates the kind of unique, industrial isolation that can only be achieved within a teeming city. These tricks are stylish– they're the foundation of *The Forgotten*'s atmosphere of unreality – but as the plot is developed they become pertinent as well. His use of New York deepens what's anonymous and illogical about the evil at work within the film.

Ruben has a sense of humor, too, and many of the most enjoyable moments in *The Forgotten* – the payoffs to the film's most suspenseful scenes– are both ridiculously scary and hilariously unexpected. That they remain inexplicable for much of the film only adds to the fun. To say more would be a criminal breach, but I do want to mention that Alfre Woodard, marvelous as a New York City cop, has a sendoff I'll never forget. It's insanity; I can't remember when a movie last gave me such a thrill or seemed like so much fun.

The Forgotten hits a few false notes, particularly in a climactic battle that ventures too far into *Outer Limits* territory. The allegiances of a key character are too easily read, and I'd be tempted to cut a chase or two, although even these are imaginatively handled. Leaving the theater, though, I felt totally satisfied– could anyone say that about *Gothika* or *The Cell*? – and the

memory of some of the scares made me laugh out loud.

The Forgotten is an ideal entertainment for a fall evening. Go.



***The Door* has machismo, little else**

Originally published September 30, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



JOHN IRVING SUCKS: For all the fine acting and directing in *The Door in the Floor*, the problem is in the source material, a story written by an author who simply doesn't understand that women are people, too.



saw where *The Door in the Floor* was described by another critic as being the best John Irving adaptation to yet reach the screen, and that may be so.

I imagine that adapting Irving would present real challenges; his writing exhibits an obstinate *machismo* (he's surely best recognized from the publicity photo in which he's decked out in boxing gear), he has a penchant for grisly detail that finds its way into even his most "sensitive" material, and he doesn't understand women well enough to write them believably, a shortcoming he ignores rather than acknowledges. As he's matured he's foregone much of the outlandish plotting and characterizations that shocked the *bourgeoisie* (or that pretended to in order to flatter readers who accepted it) and that pulled in enough of an audience to make *The World According to Garp* a bestseller.

Still, you get nervous at the prospect of accepting him as a serious writer; compared to a contemporary like Denis Johnson, isn't his material actually pretty thin?

For audiences watching *The Door in the Floor*, the meagerness of the premise becomes the primary experience.

The title is that of a children's story that the protagonist, a famous author, has written in which an unborn boy is uncertain whether or not he wishes to emerge from the womb into the world. His mother shares his ambivalence, largely because a door in the floor of their home opens onto unimaginable horrors; how long before the boy, being a boy, would be overcome by temptation and open it? (In case you overlook the obvious symbolism — that the door in the floor refers rather crudely to the vagina as well — the screenplay supplies a character to explain it.)

In the film's opening scenes, this writer (Ted Cole, played by Jeff Bridges) announces a wish to separate from his wife Marion (Kim Basinger) for the summer, although the two will share an apartment on alternate nights and a country home by the sea. They have a young daughter named Ruth (Elle Fanning), but their two older boys were recently killed in an accident. Ted also announces that he's hired a young college boy named Eddie (Jon Foster) to drive him. (He's a drunk, and he's lost his license.) Eddie is about the same age as the boys who were killed; before long he accepts Marion's seduction, and a clash of male egos is underway.

Director Tod Williams is a man of real talent; he brings intelligence to this project and provides many small pleasures. (And he apparently is drawn to this type of thing; his only other film, the wonderful *The Adventures of Sebastian Cole*, is another coming-of-age story set in a similarly dysfunctional family.)

Leafy touches abound; the film's first shot, for instance, pictures little Ruth making her way down a hallway, and it comes into focus gradually, a harbinger of the discoveries many characters will make over the course of the film and a sly reference to the importance photographs play in the plot.

Williams makes a game, too, of differentiating between nakedness and nudity, contrasting Ted's casual shower in front of Eddie with the raw vulnerability of a female model (played well by Mimi Rogers) who later poses for the lecherous writer.

As in *Sebastian Cole*, Williams shows a gift for working with actors.

Bridges is a delight here, a pompous stand-in for Irving perhaps, who fussily insists on using squid ink for his illustrations, and whose sense of entitlement allows him even to bodily punish the physically immature Eddie when he takes up with his wife. He's horrible (and his lack of decency goes too far for us to find him irascibly lovable in the end as we may be intended to do).

As Eddie, young Jon Foster is a real find; as an actor he's unafraid — he's uninhibited by concern for his image — and his presence is natural and real. Anger and lust, when they occur, burn on his face like the teenager he is — he hasn't developed the skills to hide them yet — and he conveys the awkwardness of his transition to young manhood utterly convincingly.

Bijou Phillips appears in a small role and, as always, you can't take your eyes off her. Talk about

presence; even when she's playing a bitch, you long to stay in her company.

One performance is lacking, however, and it's Kim Basinger's. She's distracted; she's meant to be, of course, having never recovered from the loss of her sons and unable even to relate the circumstances of it to Eddie. But this on-screen distraction is different from the one that's scripted; in the film's first half, her line reading is just that — reading — and she comes to life only as her involvement with Eddie escalates into romance.

I don't blame Basinger or even Williams, who adapted the material for the screen. I blame Irving. His schematic is such that his Marion Cole is less a character than a plot device; her role is conceived of only as a catalyst for the activities of the men around her. If Basinger initially conveys nothing of her loss except a kind of catatonia, it's because Irving can't imagine an *active* way that a woman might react; Basinger's portrayal of this stasis may be the best that any actress could manage.

It comes as no surprise later when she makes overtures to the surrogate son who arrives in her life; she is, after all, a man's conception of a woman, and in that context such a development is inevitable.

Basinger has another function in the film, and that's as a receptacle of a kind of mystical feminine intuition. When Eddie prepares for a confrontation with Ted, she dispenses advice that reveals an almost magical understanding of her husband's psyche. She offers the pointer, for instance, that although Ted may hit Eddie, he'll do it with an open hand; should Eddie then strike Ted in the nose with his fist, Ted will stop. It may often be true that no one knows a man so well as his wife, but in *The Door in the Floor* it's as though Marion is receiving signals directly from Venus, womankind's pop-metaphysical home.

The truth is that nothing much *does* come as a surprise in *The Door in the Floor* and that many of the revelations of the plot are well-understood by the audience before they've arrived. The film isn't intended as a thriller, but rather as a character study and a coming-of-age tale; but even so, the material is slim and becomes slimmer still by our advance grasp of it.

Williams has miscalculated the audience's investment in his characters' lives, and what is meant to be novelistic in detail instead comes to seem belabored. There were no moments in *The Door in the Floor* when I felt that I was seeing a bad movie. But the sense that I was attending a misfire was with me much of the time.



***Sky Captain* stays airborne**

Originally published September 23, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



GUNS SOLVE EVERYTHING: The retro feel of *Sky Captain* goes to the core with a screenplay that's as true to the noir style as the images. The modern camerawork tips the film's hand, however.

T

he visual landscape of *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* is derived from American movies of the 1930s and '40s. Its pre-film noir aesthetic has a foggy, soft-focus look to it, and it's shot in a sepia-toned color that both mutes its palette and enhances brighter hues. (You see a similar effect in colorized films, although *Sky Captain* is never so ugly.)

In the film's opening scenes, a zeppelin flies into New York, and the city is conceived in such a way as to recall Alfred Stieglitz's early 20th century photos of it: its verticalness makes canyons of the streets between office towers, and the weather is cloudy, snowy, picturesque.

Included is a shot of a skyscraper that quotes the painting *Radiator Building, 1929* by Stieglitz's wife, Georgia O'Keeffe. Later in the film, we see a radio tower emitting its signal in jagged waves, like the one that opened RKO pictures of the era, and there are tributes to *King Kong* and *The Wizard of Oz*. And the flying robots that descend on Manhattan at the outset are like the un-human machine in *The Man from Planet X* inflated to enormous size.

It's very smart, and its nostalgia for an earlier era of film is welcome, not least because it provides an alternative to the junky fantasy visuals that dominate the screen.

It wouldn't fool audiences from the early '40s, when it's apparently set; even without the special effects, the camerawork — such as the use of reaction shots in conversation — would betray it (and audiences would detect the difference even if they weren't consciously aware of it). Screen nostalgia like this can easily turn fraudulent, but in *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* it has the effect of deepening the context of its fantasy.

This fantasy has to do with an evil scientist who intends to wipe out Earth's inhabitants and, like Noah, repopulate it with pairs of animals once the humans are out of the way.

Standing between this madman and civilization is the heroic pilot Sky Captain (Jude Law) and his ex-girlfriend, an intrepid reporter named Polly Perkins (Gwyneth Paltrow). Their adventures are a virtual compendium of second-feature screen perils: there are the giant robots, futuristic fighter planes that flap their wings like birds, dinosaurs, and lots of malevolent machines. And of course our hero and heroine find occasion to rekindle their romance.

Sky Captain's retro conception extends into Kerry Conran's screenplay — there is, for instance, no profanity, and the scares are silly enough that parents could feel comfortable taking the kids — but the film's real coup is the now old-fashioned clarity of its action sequences. Near the opening Sky Captain battles the giant robots in the streets of Manhattan in his plane while Polly, who claims to know a shortcut, navigates, and it's a killer adventure. ("Turn left at the drug store," Polly instructs the frantic pilot.) A later airborne skirmish ends with Sky Captain plunging into the ocean, and this scene likewise connects.

Here and elsewhere, Conran (as director) makes full use of his film's dizzying heights, and he keeps the editing smooth and the action beautifully clear.

Jude Law has the perfect, effortless good looks for this heroic pilot, and his British accent (despite a real-life character name of Joe) adds a suave touch that fits into the WW II-era milieu. His job, in *Sky Captain*, amounts pretty much to conveying decency and adding a little charm to his lines, and this he manages without visible effort.

Playing Polly, Gwyneth Paltrow is a less successful match; her speech sometimes reveals what another, better critic once described as "post-hippie diction," and her walk seems awkward in period shoes and clothes. She and Law have chemistry, but in a role that calls for something like subservience — she's all the time saying "I'm going with you" as Sky Captain embarks on dangerous missions — she gives the impression that she isn't accustomed to deferring, or even pretending to defer, to men.

Giovanni Ribisi, as Sky Captain's friend and his unit's gadget inventor, best embraces the period detail of his role, and, as always, it's a pleasure to watch him perform.

Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow isn't a great film, or even a great small film, but it's enjoyable, and in the context of recent mainstream releases it passes as original, too.

Most young American directors could learn a valuable lesson from Conran's handling of action, and, clocking in as it does at under two hours, the film's efficiency is a marvel. Conran skips what chokes so much screen adventure today: extraneous characters, endless back story, ethical dilemmas, personal revelations made by a tormented hero. Instead he keeps *Sky Captain* airborne. The time flies by.



***Wicker Park* a heavily masked romance**

Originally published September 16, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



STYLISH OR JUNKY?: With a slowly revealed plot and shots that obscure instead of clarify, there's a lot less going on than there should be.

T

he new romantic suspense film *Wicker Park* is developed with an aggravating central mystery at its core; viewers arriving even a few minutes late will likely feel that they've missed the picture's premise, but in reality the truth of the film's conflict is so late in presenting itself that the action feels insular and obscured right out of the gate.

Josh Hartnett stars as Matthew, a young Chicago photographer who meets Ms. Right in the person of Lisa (Diane Kruger), a dancer. We eventually come to learn that although these two were very deeply in love at one point, they've been separated for mysterious reasons. Matthew Lillard plays Matthew's best friend Luke — he's a bit of a wacko — and he takes up company with an enigmatic young woman named Alex (Rose Byrne) whose peculiarities eventually come to play a central part in the plot. When at last we get a clear view of it — it's hard to get a look at, like words printed at the bottom of a pool — this plot concerns the efforts of Lisa and Matthew to get back in touch with one another and to overcome an obstacle of which both are unaware.

In *Wicker Park* there are a couple of factors working against narrative clarity. Front and center is the film's fractured storytelling style; the

picture unfolds as though director Paul McGuigan and screenwriter Brandon Boyce agree to let the audience in on the plot only on a need-to-know basis. The pivotal romance, for instance, is revealed tangentially in cryptic flashbacks overlaying the primary action, and basic plot points, such as the amount of time that our two leads have been separated, remain unclear.

The filmmakers intended this effect, obviously, but how satisfying it is is a matter of debate. The approach does supply a big payoff, if only by virtue of the fact that the entire picture becomes clear only at the film's climax.

But for me the prior action suffers — I struggle with perceived plot discrepancies and missing narrative elements, not trusting the filmmaker to come through with explanations in the end. In the case of *Wicker Park* they do, largely; but the film may require a more trusting frame of mind than I'm able to provide. It frustrates.

This narrative fragmentation is echoed visually in *Wicker Park*'s cluttered, and sometimes splintered, frames. Cinematographer Peter Sova shoots for tonal effects — he splits the screen for concurrent action, films reflections over foreground action, and makes self-conscious use of mirrors to the extent that you almost begin to regret the inventive precedent set in *Dressed to Kill*.

The film aims for high style — everything about it is tasteful and hip, from the Chicago park of the title on down — but its look is rather junky in the end, and many of its trick effects seem ill-fitted to the material. The transitional editing often suggests science fiction, when really the story is that of a romance beset by tragic, sometimes creepy complications. In that way, *Wicker Park* may exhibit the least appropriate *Matrix* influence yet.

In the lead, Hartnett comports himself sexily in a suit and tie, but he strains to communicate the deep, wordless passion he's meant to feel toward his beloved — he's held too long in silent gazes that show him trying, although in one scene, when he poses as a shoe salesman, he's appealingly dumfounded.

Kruger is given the thankless task of acting mysteriously feminine and vaguely exotic (she mentions at one point that her mother "returned to Prague"), and while she's certainly attractive, she's glimpsed beguilingly through windows or at a distance several times too often; when, later, she's given lines dealing with such terrestrial matters as getting a job it deflates the already overworked illusion.

Only Byrne stands out; her complicated Alex is a daffy creation to begin with, and Byrne overplays the melodrama in her role to sometimes delightful effect. Hers is a silly performance, but the gamble

sometimes original effect. Here is a tiny performance, but the game she takes is a smart one — it reflects an intelligence in the actress — and it provides the film with its best moments.

Wicker Park (which is based on the French film *L'Appartement*) is an essentially weightless entertainment, made unique among this summer's films, perhaps, in that its essential element is old-fashioned screen romance.

The high style director McGuigan brings to it masks, rather than updates, what's essentially conventional in the material; he doesn't exhibit the wit or imagination of, say, Baz Luhrmann, whose *Moulin Rouge* effectively re-imagined a genre. As a sign of its old-fashionedness, consider this: *Wicker Park* has no body count. It's refreshing. On the other hand, neither of our star-crossed lovers owns a cell phone, an oversight that, once corrected, would certainly have prevented the whole damn thing.



French Film 101

Deeper into DVD

Originally published September 9, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



>*SEE IT*

The Golden Coach, F5



>*SEE IT*

French Cancan, F5



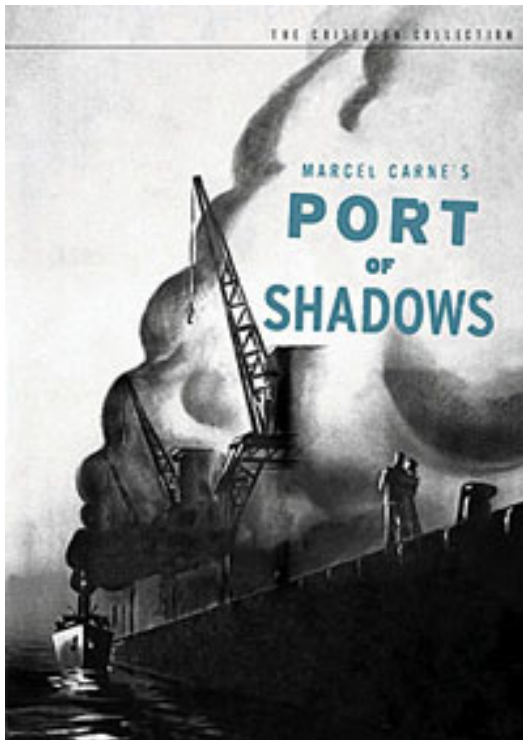
>*SEE IT*

Elena and Her Men, F3



>*SEE IT*

Rules of the Game, F5



>*SEE IT*

Port of Shadows, F4



> *SEE IT*

A Woman is a Woman, F4

I

t sounds like the kind of thing only a movie critic could love: a three-DVD collection of Jean Renoir's loose trilogy of films from late in his career that takes as its theme the ways in which the life of the theater is mirrored in the real world beyond the proscenium arch. In reality, the Criterion Collection's *Jean Renoir: Stage and Spectacle* has something for true movie lovers everywhere, and the generous extras included in the set let you investigate the trilogy as deeply as you care to go.

The best in the set is 1953's *The Golden Coach* (F5), a remarkable film about an Italian *commedia dell'arte* troupe that arrives in an 18th-century Spanish colony in Peru on the same day as the title coach, an awesome luxury intended for use by the viceroy at official functions. When the viceroy falls in love with the troupe's female star (many other men in the capital do as well, including a celebrity matador and the troupe's manager), he causes an uproar among the Catholic citizenry by presenting the coach as a gift to this mere actress. *The Golden Coach* features a legendary performance by Italian powerhouse Anna Magnani in the role of the actress, and it remains among the very best screen meditations on the ways in which the life of the theater and that of the real world interact and overlap.

1956's *French Cancan* (F5) uses the opening of Paris's infamous Moulin Rouge to explore similar material. In the stylized Paris of the film, an impresario named Danglard (Jean Gabin) juggles the concerns of money men, prima donnas, lovesick princes, street people, and starlets in his effort to

reintroduce the cancan on the opening night of the club. His success, like that of the film, culminates in an eye-popping dance finale that really has to be seen to be believed.

The least successful of the three is 1956's *Elena and Her Men* (F3), but its liability rests in its resemblance to another Renoir film, 1939's exquisite and biting *Rules of the Game* (F5). As the latter film has been recently made available on DVD, again by the Criterion Collection, the curious can make the comparison themselves — and they're encouraged to. Where *Elena* uses its central love roundelay as a lighthearted vehicle for the examination of the ways in which all of life is a stage, *Rules* turns similar material into a really scathing indictment of social mores of its day. How scathing? At its release, the film shocked the populous of Paris to the extent that they threw chairs at the screen; the Occupation went a step further, banning the film and destroying prints. Looking at *Rules of the Game* today, we find a film that ranks among the very greatest of screen comedies (because, despite the viciousness of its content, it's a delirious comedy with an exquisitely light touch) or, for that matter, among the very greatest films, period. Criterion's edition supplies generous extras that place the film in context and illustrate its enormous influence on all film that came after.

Jean Gabin, star of *French Cancan*, was France's major matinee idol of the '30s; he can be seen at the height of his existential sensitivity and droopy good looks in 1938's *Port of Shadows* (F4), a touchstone of the so-called "poetic realism" school of filmmaking that flourished in that time and place. If contemporary filmgoers read it as film noir (which followed later in America) they'll be forgiven: it shares with that genre a preoccupation with criminal lowlife, a downbeat sensibility, and an evocative, fog-and-shadows black-and-white. The story is that of a drifter who falls in love with a hardscrabble, 17-year-old *femme fatale*, and the complications that follow when her petty thief guardian attempts to quash the romance. But what's most memorable about *Port of Shadows* (also newly available from Criterion) is its atmosphere of street romance.

Checking in on a later French school of filmmaking, Criterion has recently released new wave auteur Jean-Luc Godard's remarkable rethinking of the American musical, 1961's *A Woman is a Woman* (F4). Godard made a career of defying expectations, and so it is that *A Woman is a Woman* shares the bright audacity of American musicals even as it subverts their conventions. In this Hollywood-derived environment, no one sings or dances much, the heroine is a stripper, and Michel Legrand's gorgeous score intrudes upon the action rather than complementing it. Godard chose for his lead a pretty young Anna Karina (she would later become the director's wife), and her well-documented charm may never have found a better vehicle; in the male leads, French stars Jean-Claude Brialy and Jean-Paul Belmondo shine.

Taken together, these six films are like a self-contained course in the highlights of French filmmaking (and you can take more from them than from some very learned books I've read on the subject). Thanks to Criterion for (ideally) returning these titles to a video shelf near you.



Fantastic *Hero* soars and lags

Originally published September 2, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



CROUCHING RASHOMON: There's no way for *Hero* to get away from its inevitable comparisons to the Chinese-made *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and the Japanese-made *Rashomon*. But it's a beautiful movie in its own right. And its failings are its own, too.

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he new Zhang Yimou film *Hero* recalls, and perhaps pays subtle tribute to, a pair of esteemed Asian films that came before it: 2000's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* most obviously, and to a lesser extent Kurosawa's great 1951 *Rashomon*.

If ultimately *Hero* compares unfavorably to both, it's worth bearing in mind that the comparison being made is that of an often thoughtful and beautiful film to two groundbreaking and visceral ones; the comparison is weighted against *Hero*, just as comparing every French film to Godard or every musical to *Singin' in the Rain* would be. The similarities are so central, though, that viewers will be forgiven if, watching *Hero*, the other two films come to mind.

The *Crouching Tiger* comparison is summoned because, like *Tiger* director Ang Lee, Zhang is an auteur with an impressive reputation among American art house audiences who is working for the first time within the martial arts genre. (Zhang's previous work includes wonderful films such as *Not One Less*, the peerlessly amusing *Happy Times*, *To Live*.)

.....

Like *Tiger*, *Hero* is driven by its action pieces, and in these he seems to have taken cues from *Tiger*: these sequences have a similar poetry and technique — although they seek to achieve different ends — and Zhang employs a similar, martial drumbeat on the score.

It's possible that the *Rashomon* connection, on the other hand, is mostly available to Western eyes, that an Asian viewer would not automatically associate that Japanese film with this Chinese one. But many American viewers are bound to spot a narrative parallel: *Hero*'s about-faces in plot and shifting blame depend upon the point-of-view of the character relating the facts of the story, just as the rape and murder at the heart of *Rashomon* changed in the accounts of those who witnessed them.

Hero begins with the arrival of a feudal warrior with the sobriquet Nameless at the palace of the emperor of the Chinese province of Qin. Nameless has killed three legendary assassins — Sky, Broken Sword, and Flying Snow — who have long sought to assassinate the emperor, and he is as such received as a hero.

In a private interview with the emperor, who has long since forbidden any subject to approach within one hundred paces of his throne, Nameless answers the emperor's questions about how he defeated the assassins, and his victories are shown in flashback.

The emperor, though, is unconvinced; could Nameless himself be an assassin who has used his new celebrity to approach within striking distance of the throne? The emperor relays a theoretical alternate to *Hero*'s tale, which again is shown in flashback, and which casts Nameless not as a hero but as an imminent assassin.

As the two edit and re-imagine the events that led to the death of assassins, the past is rewritten onscreen until at last a kind of truth is arrived at.

As this happens, the concepts of hero and villain are likewise reexamined, and Nameless's position vacillates between the two. The motives of the assassins and even the emperor come under scrutiny, so that Zhang leaves us with a picture of heroism as nebulous and subjective as the tales his protagonists tell. The one defining trait? Zhang seems to say that a real hero is he who is willing to live and die selflessly for his ideals.

The core of *Hero* though is its action pieces, and like *Crouching Tiger*, these are light years away from the '70s grindhouse action that birthed the martial arts genre.

In *Tiger*, Lee shot his action from a distance, and much of what was thrilling about these scenes was the clarity he brought to the combat. Zhang has a more balletic approach, closer to vintage Peckinnah or the

Zhang has a more sincere approach, closer to Village People's dreamscape de Palma of *The Fury*, that is shot and edited to convey the poetry and motives of his fantastic martial arts interludes — "fantastic" here used in its other-worldly connotation.

Many of these battles — especially one between two women fought in an autumn forest and another in which two warriors fend off a skyful of arrows that threaten their school — are gorgeous screen spectacles, drenched in evocative color and featuring beautifully framed compositions. They feature a kind of wishful continuity that makes no sense schematically (two men speak intimately but in the next shot are shown to be far apart, for instance, or a weapon is handed off to another person who is then shown to be distant, or unarmed) but that deepens the magical context in which the battles take place.

What's important here, Zhang says, is that a weapon was handed off, or that one character intended to arm another; whether they did, or would have been able to, is beside the point.

Jet Li plays Nameless; his role calls for inscrutability, and his performance is studiously unreadable. Zhang reins him in to the extent that even his action scenes are performed without visible emotion. (If Li had gloated or acted the avenger, as he has license to do in films like *The One*, it would have killed the film.)

As the assassins Broken Arrow and Flying Snow, the beautiful actors Tony Leung (*Happy Together*) and Maggie Cheung (a really marvelous screen presence, as Western audiences familiar with her from *Irma Vep* will know) are a memorable pair, and their performances are golden.

Cheung is irresistible, even in the shrewish permutations that the role sometimes requires from her. In the scene in which tens of thousands of arrows are penetrating the school in which she is encamped, she encounters Nameless in the hallway as she goes out to fight off the attack. (This she does by knocking the hail of arrows from the air using only her hands and gown.) As they strike by the dozens, streaking past them at a distance of inches and bristling from the walls, she asks, "Why are you leaving?" as though these arrows presented no threat or difficulty. Nameless explains that he's going to help fend off the arrows, to which she replies, like the mad Jeeves of combat, "Your help is unneeded. Please retire."

In moments like these, *Hero* soars. (In this instance and many others, really literate subtitles catch the humor that in many films they would have missed.) Where it lags is in its conception; it lacks the crazy immediacy and earthiness of *Rashomon* and the intricacies of *Crouching Tiger* — or, rather, perhaps, its intricacies are less compelling. And its redundant narrative structure requires too many final partings, too many climaxes, too many of which turn out to be speculative or simply not

real. That the poetry of its battles redeems much of it is a testament to Zhang's versatility.

Perhaps the best way to evaluate *Hero* is within the context of Zhang's own work, and thus that of a major filmmaker. It stands well above the director's lesser works, such as *The Road Home* while not ranking among his masterpieces or such lovely minor works as *Happy Times*. Its resemblance to Ang Lee and Kurosawa detracts from it, but it's a comparison that can be safely stored away. *Hero* is an often lovely film on its own.



Hopeless *Anacondas* nearly watchable

Originally published September 2, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



THEY SMELL YOUR FEAR, AND STUFF: Big snakes, pretty people dying and large plot holes ... exactly what you'd expect from a dumb sequel to a dumb movie. But at least it's not worse than that.



I can't imagine how it happened, but, as you may know, there's a sequel to 1997's *Anaconda* in the theaters. Have mercy already.

Titled *Anacondas: The Hunt for the Blood Orchid*, the picture is hopeless to begin with; the only surprise it had in store for me was that I made it to the end.

The most amusing feature of the first film is that is "starred" Eric Stoltz, who was sidelined by sickness early in the screenplay, retired to the cabin of the boat on which the action took place, and was not seen again until he emerged near the movie's end.

In *Anacondas* we have a fresh supply of victims, the best-known of them being Johnny Messner, the muscled former star of TV's *The Guiding Light*, the least, perhaps, being an actor named Aireti who dies early on.

In the mock reality in which *Anacondas* unfolds, a pharmaceutical company has identified a compound in a rare orchid that slows exponentially the aging process in laboratory rats. This orchid grows only in the wilderness of Borneo, blooming once every seven years beginning right away, and it thus becomes necessary for this company to immediately dispatch its top researchers, plus, I think, one of its top executives, to retrieve some.

These top researchers are, without exception, attractive young people in their mid-20s. For reasons not touched on in the film, and despite torrential rains and an unlimited supply of funds, these young people choose to charter a boat to arrive at their destination rather than a helicopter. Unfortunately their embarkation up the Bornean river corresponds with the beginning of the mating season for a species of uncommonly large anacondas. Despite the best efforts of a seasoned, yet still quite young and attractive river boat captain (Messner), many of these top researchers are, I'm sad to report, then eaten by the snakes. I was tempted to question the company's wisdom in sending all of its top researchers on a dangerous expedition into the wilderness of Borneo— it's kind of like sending all your generals and majors on a single, risky bombing mission, isn't it?— but then decided that they might always resort to using older, less attractive top researchers in the future and that really I didn't care.

Anacondas isn't especially tedious, which is the worst case scenario, and it only shocks the audience gratuitously on a handful of occasions. The cast, while implausible, was reasonably sexy, and that's important since in vehicles like this we often resort to ogling them out of desperation. The snakes were OK, and I understood most of the conclusion, too.

But should you go see it? Well hell no. Like those top researchers, I have a job to do, and it's to journey into the aesthetic wilderness of *Anacondas* so that you don't have to. This time I was lucky. But will I make it through *Super Babies: Baby Geniuses 2*?



***A Home at the End of the World* is adult, smart**

Originally published September 2, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



COOCHY COO: *A Home at the End of the World* not only has the highest word count of any current release, it treats its characters humanely.

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Home at the End of the World captures a fleeting moment in the subculture of 1980s America with heart-rending precision.

Adapted for the screen by Michael Cunningham from his own novel (an excerpted short story from this novel, *White Angel*, remains one of the really great stories to appear in *The New Yorker* in William Shawn's final years there) and directed by Michael Mayer, who makes his directorial debut here, *A Home at the End of the World* tells the story of Bobby, a child of the drug-addled 60s and 70s, who loses his cherished big brother and both parents in separate incidents while still very young, and who is taken under the wing of his best friend Johnny's family.

When Johnny moves on to New York, Bobby remains in Pennsylvania with his friend's parents until they retire to Arizona; finding himself alone again, Bobby moves to New York, where he takes up residence with a now-gay Johnny and his best friend Clare.

The three form a kind of a family, but one complicated by romantic love: Johnny, who fooled around with Bobby as a child, is still in love with him; Clare, once in love with Johnny, now takes Bobby into her bed; and Bobby, a loving, vulnerable boy inhabiting the body of a man, still haunted by loss and terrified of being left alone, returns any affection offered him, content to be Clare's boyfriend and the eventual father of her child, but still deeply attached to Johnny, whom he admires.

At two points in the film, Bobby, who is essentially straight, asks Johnny to dance with him, and as they trade embraces Bobby kisses his friend very frankly on the mouth. Bobby, who is expressing genuine emotion, sees nothing wrong with this, or with the threesome's unconventional family situation; intellectually, none of them does.

But affairs of the heart are not intellectual matters, and it's the unforeseen emotional chaos that

ultimately strands these three characters at the end of the world.

In its depiction of the '80s, *A Home at the End of the World* feels eerily like a genuine artifact; it captures the tone of that era's iconoclasm in its production design and details, but it also echoes the fiction of that decade — the coming-of-age dispatches of Peter Cameron, David Leavitt, and so on — that charted the hesitant debut of gay Americans on the stage of public life.

The film is honest, thanks largely to Cunningham's emotionally intelligent screenplay, but, like that same fiction and like the independent films of that decade, it finds a hopefulness, too. At the end of *A Home at the End of the World*, we find our heroes facing an uncertain and frightening future. But there's hope that, despite the chaos, they've managed a life for themselves just the same.

At the center of the film is a performance by Colin Farrell, as Bobby, that's only partially successful. His boyish good looks are ideal for the role — it's no stretch to imagine that he never quite grew up, or that others find him attractive, but he plays his character as a collection of affectations that read as such for most of the film. This man may never be one of our best actors, but he certainly has all the makings of a star.

Robin Wright Penn, shrewd but vulnerable herself, is far better as Clare, and Dallas Roberts is so convincing as Johnny that he borders on stereotype. Sissy Spacek, a pleasure wherever she occurs, appears as Johnny's mother, opposite Matt Frewer in a wonderful, small performance.

A Home at the End of the World is a satisfying and enjoyable little film on a par with Mario Van Peebles's *Baadasssss!* or Jim Sheridan's *In America*. It's not perfect, but it's adult and intelligent. This late in the summer, the two can feel like nearly the same thing.



***Exorcist: The Beginning* is irrelevant**

Originally published August 26, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



RUN, IT'S A SCANDAL: The curse of *Exorcist: The Beginning* is that the producers fired and hired to make it as gaudy as possible.

I

would think that John Boorman, director of *Exorcist II: The Heretic*, is now officially off the hook. His *Exorcist* sequel is surely among the most maligned films ever made in this country, and critics of all calibers have long made a pastime of vilifying it.

I rather enjoyed it, not least because Boorman's distaste of the original *Exorcist* was written all over it. (Boorman was offered the first film and reportedly responded, "I can't do this. I have daughters.") Not that it matters, but I share his antipathy; I credit *The Exorcist* with having effectively ruined my favorite genre of filmmaking — the horror film — and with having substantially lowered the bar for what kind of "entertainment" can be offered under that description.

The reason it doesn't matter is that the new *Exorcist* sequel, *Exorcist: The Beginning*, is irrelevant to anything that may have come before it anyway.

And it arrives in theaters packaged in scandal: the film's producers fired director Paul Schrader (a filmmaker with real talent; he wrote *Taxi Driver*, for instance, and directed *Auto Focus* and *Affliction*) from the project after he had submitted a complete film, saying, according to a widely distributed report, that the film lacked "the bloody violence" that they had requested. They then hired Renny Harlin as a replacement, and the film was almost entirely re-shot.

My single positive comment about the film is that it looks great. The cinematography, by the legendary Vittorio Storaro (*Apocalypse Now*, *Last Tango in Paris*), has an amazing quality of light to it, and even when it's garish, as it is in many of the stylized, exterior long shots, it retains a kind of dignity.

The cinematography is the only dignified thing about *Exorcist: The Beginning*; watching this

extravagant, numbing, and stupid fiasco, you can't help but wonder what Schrader had turned in that was somehow worse. It *couldn't* be.

Exorcist: The Beginning is a self-contained textbook of everything that's wrong with contemporary film: it's unpaced — it climaxes relentlessly and, since Harlin cuts between the never-ending set pieces that comprise the film, it sometimes packs dual climaxes into its start-over-every-three-minutes structure — it's packed with gratuitous material, it's off-handedly racist, its dialogue teeters constantly between the blankly expository and the unintentionally hilarious (example: "You want to put your rotten cock in her juicy ass"), it's not frightening, its effects are cheap (the hyenas, for instance, were wisely left out of previews), it's incoherently plotted, it humiliates its actors, the score (by Trevor Rabin) and sound editing and design are literally the worst that I can recall ever having heard in a major release — the very worst — and the editing (by Mark Goldblatt and Todd E. Miller) is a rookie knock-off of the very lowest of John Carpenter's empty bag of shock tricks.

Watching *Exorcist: The Beginning* is an experience comprising dire tedium with frequent eruptions of film-school shock effects accompanied by crescendos in the score and shrieking sound effects on the audio track.

Does it frighten you? No. It pisses you off. *Exorcist: The Beginning* isn't entertainment. It's assault and battery.

I'm furious to report, too, that the Holocaust is brought into this bullshit morality play. The Catholic church signed off on the original *Exorcist* by supplying Jesuits as consultants for the production, so my feeling is that it can now gladly suffer whatever indignities that that film and its sequels visit upon it.

Is it too much to ask, though, that the actual, horrific suffering of millions of European Jews and gentiles not be annexed by the whoremongers at Morgan Creek productions and by screenwriter Alexi Hawley and story writers William Wisher and Caleb Carr to be trivialized for the benefit of their sham entertainment and accompanying material gains? May I use this public forum to ask that they go fuck themselves?

Sitting benumbed in the audience at *Exorcist: The Beginning*, I didn't worry about the welfare of the characters or wonder what the narrative held in store. I wondered how what I was seeing could be possible. Renny Harlin is not a director of great subtlety or sophistication, but he does make an honest effort for the most part, and his *The Long Kiss Goodnight* and *The Deep Blue Sea* were loopy, outstanding entertainments.

I feel that he is incapable of having botched any project this spectacularly without assistance, and the fact of Schrader's removal from the film very likely indicates that he was working under enormous pressure from his producers and the executives at Morgan Creek. Good work, you guys. My sincere, but probably vain, hope is that they lose their shirts.

It's tragic to think how many reputations will be damaged by *Exorcist: The Beginning*; it could be that even composer Rabin, who was brought onto the project after Schrader's composer was fired along with him, was working with interference or on an impossible deadline. But sitting in the darkened auditorium absorbing the movie's one-two combination punches of withering

incompetence and unthinking, attack-dog aggressiveness, it's hard to muster much sympathy for the participants.

None is likely to suffer as much as those poor moviegoers who pay good money to see this film. (It wasn't screened for the media before its wide release, specifically to prevent advance warning from critics; not even Ebert could like it.)

There's a little boy in the film who gets sick and whose bed shakes familiarly, and there's a woman who's converted into a monster (she's more *Evil Dead* than *Exorcist*, but never mind), there are battalions of troops and natives who are slaughtered, a French scientist who opens up his own throat, another boy who is torn apart by the ridiculous hyenas. The real victims, though, are the opening weekend masses. Morgan Creek is Satan, and we're its little Regans.



Open Water a long wait with little motion

Originally published August 26, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



SHARKS SUCK: A couple's drift in the open ocean is punctuated by sightings of distant ships, shark spottings, leg cramps, but there's very little action.

O

nce, over drinks late at night, a friend of mine revealed to me that the previous week she had

peed in the sea while swimming in the Straits of Bosphorus off the Turkish coast, and that this had attracted a squid or octopus of some sort that attached itself to her leg and wouldn't let go.

She beat at it and tried to pull it off, and then hopped out of the sea on one leg, where some Turkish men cut this thing's head off and then peeled away its still-gripping legs. My friend had squid hickies on her leg as proof that this was true.

She was very cavalier in relating all of this, but I almost stopped breathing.

The ocean and its inhabitants are so terrifying to me that I wondered if I would have lived through her squid ordeal.

Watching *Open Water* the other night, I had a similar sensation when I learned the film's premise: a young couple goes scuba diving off the coast of an unidentified tropical island, and as they cavort underwater, their boat returns to port without them, leaving them stranded in the open sea.

Will I, I wondered in the theater, have a panic attack *right now*?

Open Water, which is the second film by director Chris Kentis, opens with the information that it's based on actual events. That may be true (although the film's conclusion leaves you wondering to what extent it could be), but in filmmaking terms, this premise is iffy.

In its opening scenes, it achieves a mood of apprehension, and the realization of the couple's predicament is, as I said, terrifying. After that, the problem of how to dramatize the couple's plight rises front and center in the film.

We're told that these waters are shark-infested, and in that *Open Water* plays the same waiting game as a disaster film: the film's narrative drive depends upon the couple becoming imperiled by these sharks, just as *The Hindenburg* depended on its explosion or *The Poseidon Adventure* its catastrophic wave. The problem unique to *Open Water* is that there's very little for its heroes to do in the interim except float and wait themselves.

Kentis, who also wrote the film, doesn't find a way to sustain it.

The couple's drift in the open ocean is punctuated by fruitless sightings of distant ships, shark sightings, leg cramps, but there's very little action available to the audience and no visual variety to the unbroken sea.

The two are photographed too closely for too long (budgetary constraints may have forced the director's hand here), and their characters remain uninvestigated.

The couple (Susan, played by Blanchard Ryan, and Daniel, played by Daniel Travis) fill time with wisecracks that only very gradually turn to desperation, and the director fills screen time with ominous shots of the sky, ocean, and tropical flora and fauna of the distant island.

Kentis waits too long to take the audience back to shore, where the crew of the boat overlook obvious signs that two of their patrons are missing, and this has the effect of killing the film's suspense. Hitchcock would have agonized us by showing the crew's gradual realization that something's gone wrong and their efforts to stage a rescue once they had; Kentis leaves the

audience knowing little more than Susan and Daniel do, so that the effect is less of suspense than hopelessness. As the two begin to argue and then to openly suffer, the movie has nowhere to go, and it becomes a grueling record of their pain and fear.

Open Water is an independent feature, shot digitally and without the use of special effects. Its editing is smart, and the spontaneous feel of the camerawork gives the proceedings the same eerie credibility as *The Blair Witch Project*. Many passages show promise, and it could be that this concept would be hard to develop satisfactorily in any hands. But Kentis makes a final, tragic decision about the movie's trajectory that makes the effort seem futile as well as pointlessly punishing.

So what began for me as panic-inducing eventually became disheartening and a little dull. I kept thinking of 1971's *Man in the Wilderness*, in which Richard Harris is mauled by a bear and lies dying for close to two hours while the audience looks on; I didn't enjoy that movie, and I didn't enjoy *Open Water* either. For me they bring an uneasy new mean to the phrase "killing time."



***Alien vs. Predator* is as bad as you think**

Originally published August 19, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



AT LEAST THEY AREN'T BUDDY COPS: What do you mean 'They've already made *Dracula Meets Wolf Man*? It's an Alien; it's a Predator! Run with it. Would someone stop, just for a minute, and write a movie with a script and characters and stuff? Please?

M

onsters don't meet up in the movies until their source lore has been wrung for every drop of blood and venom it can yield. It's the safest bet in Hollywood that by the time Dracula meets the Wolf Man, King Kong meets Godzilla, or Freddy meets Jason, not a single one of those principals can generate much excitement on his own. Joining two previously independent monsters in the title of one film signals the same desperation a sitcom producer feels when he sends his cast to Hawaii for an hour-long "special"; the time has come when the cast may well wish to consider dinner theater.

And in that spirit *Alien vs. Predator* is released into the August cineplex doldrums. The film's action opens, consecutively, in outer space, Nebraska, Nepal, Mexico, the Ross Ice Shelf in Antarctica, and finally aboard the icebreaker Piper Maru in the seas off that continent's coast.

There the head of the Weyland Corporation (Lance Henrikson) has assembled a team of top-notch scientists from around the globe to investigate with him a pyramid that one of the corporation's satellites has detected beneath the Antarctic ice. This strange pyramid incorporates features that are Egyptian, Aztec, and Cambodian, a fact that leads a handsome young scientist named Sebastian (Raoul Boba) to correctly speculate, just from its description, that this must in fact be the *first* pyramid and that it was almost certainly built by "the first civilization."

From there *Alien vs. Predator* embarks into a world that, though nominally set on this planet, is

far further removed from reality than the spaceship of the original *Alien*; the landscape in which the movie unfolds is like that of an *Eerie* magazine cover on the topic of *The Matrix*.

Beneath the ice we find a pyramid that reconfigures itself every 10 minutes (because, as Sebastian points out, the Aztecs used a 10-month calendar), and that holds one of the now-familiar *Alien* mothers in chains at its bottom.

The reason for this is that the race of super-beings from the *Predator* films breed these aliens (here called "serpents") to hunt as sport, using humans to incubate them.

Because of the interference of our scientists, however, the aliens overrun the pyramid and, although I couldn't understand a single action sequence in the film's last half, I believe that lots of tense moments ensue.

The original *Predator* surprised me, and I admired the elaborate mandibles of its monster, but it wasn't something I was enthusiastic about. I wasn't too excited about the original *Alien*, either; I felt that too many of its scares were predicated upon shock, and I blame the film with having introduced a quality of moistness, or sliminess, to its monster that's been copied in every screen monster created since. But watching *Alien vs. Predator*, it was hard for me to recall any valid complaint about the originals or their sequels. At its very worst, even *Predator 2* stands head-and-shoulders above the best of this film.

Alien vs. Predator is directed by Paul W. S. Anderson, who also had a hand in the screenplay; his work here is so lethargic that he can't even muster awe the first time an alien spacecraft fills the sky, or when the mother alien comes unchained and goes on a rampage.

Everything in *Alien vs. Predator* plays to the same dull beat, so that there's no distinction in tone between the film's most routine conversation and its deadliest battle.

Anderson's work with actors is likewise leaden — the actors themselves, I feel, should be left out of it, not having had anything to work with — so that you rely on accents and race to keep the characters distinct from one another in your mind, or on mnemonic devices such as Sebastian's resemblance to Luke Perry. The plausibility of the thing... let's just say that *Alien vs. Predator* is unburdened by plausibility. And the screenplay is truly dire.

That leaves the action sequences, but, like much recent science fiction and horror, *Alien vs. Predator* is shot (by David Johnson) and edited (by Alexander Berner) in such a way that its action scenes are virtually illegible.

It's both puzzling and somehow insulting to be subjected to these close, fast montages in which blurs of dark images, punctuated by spears and acid blood, whirl past at velocities that defy any kind of understanding or analysis. It's as though you're being beaten yourself, except that the aphasia is immediate.

Worst, though, is the look of the film. *Alien vs. Predator* lacks the dingy realism of *Alien*, and it renders its Predators inelegant — these once-proud warriors here have the bulk of 1950s sci-fi robots; they're clunky rather than lithe or menacing. The interiors are dark and the art direction,

by Richard Bridgland, a dateless, unsuccessful amalgamation of ancient past and distant future.

Are the Aliens even gooier here than previously? Very likely so.

Alien vs. Predator is the kind of late summer bomb that makes you feel that surely Hollywood has finally bankrupted itself creatively. What next? *The Children of the Corn in Breaking Training*. *Terminator V: Revenge of the Terminator vs. the Evil Dead*.



***Harold and Kumar* mocks racists for laughs**

Originally published August 12, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



DUDE, WHERE'S MY PHONE CALL: John Cho and Kal Penn do serviceable jobs staring as a non-white, stoner odd couple in *Harold and Kumar Go To White Castle*.

A

s a stoner comedy, *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* has a lot to recommend it; it's light years better than *Dude, Where's My Car?*, but not as funny as *Half Baked*.

THE MOVIE IS A COMEDY ABOUT TWO STONERS WHO GO TO WHITE CASTLE AND GET INTO A LOT OF TROUBLE.

The twist in the material is that our heroes are culled from minority groups not usually represented in feature roles on the American screen: Harold is Korean and Kumar is Indian. Neither is particularly identified with his native culture. They're like young Americans everywhere, except that they're slightly marginalized and Kumar has a funny first name.

Their *native* culture, in fact, is American, although they have to fight a little harder than whites to claim it, and when the two encounter vestiges of their parents' Eastern lifestyles, they're antagonistic toward them at first. In the end, though, *Harold and Kumar* finds a way to accommodate us all.

There are some very funny sequences in *Harold and Kumar*, and the movie is so disreputable in its premise (Harold and Kumar get stoned and then try to get to a distant White Castle) and so fly-by-night in its technique that it's easy to enjoy. It's unburdened by aspirations.

My favorite part is a mock anti-drug commercial in which a young man, after taking his first-ever hit of pot, puts a loaded rifle in his mouth, explaining to his friend that he feels great and can do anything; when he pulls the trigger, the caption "Marijuana Kills" appears on the screen.

There's also a winning absurdest sequence in which the two pick up a hitchhiker who turns out to be the actor Neil Patrick Harris, of *Doogie Howser* fame, appearing as himself. This grown-up child actor explains that he has no idea where he is or how he got there, but that he's had a lot of ecstasy and is so horny he can't stand it. When Harold and Kumar go into a convenience store, Harris licks the upholstery before stealing the car.

The best time I had at *Harold and Kumar*, though, was watching white audience members walk out during a scene in which a man explains that he was arrested for being black. Harold has just been given him a \$220 jaywalking ticket in the middle of the night on an empty highway and then hauled him in for resisting arrest. It's a nervous joke, but it's also a relief, in a way, to see the cop and his buffoon partners played for laughs. This approach begs the question; it says that some cops are racists, the only issue being whether or not you get the joke.

Racism is a constant theme in *Harold and Kumar*, just as it would be in real life: a pair of vaguely minority men are beaten in Newark, Harold's co-workers pile work on him that they should be doing themselves, and there's a gang of dimwit white youth who drink Mountain Dew and overuse the word "extreme." *Harold and Kumar* largely manages to play these racists as jokes; being asked to laugh at them seems sensible in this context. The approach is surprisingly clean.

In the leads, John Cho is Harold; his is the fastidious character to Kal

In the leads, John Cho is Harold, his is the fastidious character to Kari Penn's sloppy Kumar. Both are serviceable, but there's not much asked of them. The film was directed by Danny Leiner, whose past work includes, of course, *Dude, Where's My Car?*.



***Manchurian* remake is a gem**

Originally published August 5, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



HITTING HIS MARKS: Denzel Washington gives what has become a routinely fine performance, his necessary descent into paranoia conveyed in the deterioration of his professional, soldierly demeanor; in the film's opening scenes he struts in his uniform, but by the end he shuffles.

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ngela Lansbury blew my mind so completely in the original *The Manchurian Candidate*, (which was released in 1962, suppressed for many years shortly thereafter following the Kennedy assassinations, and then re-released in the '80s, when I first saw it on video, literally in the middle of the night) that I had to wake up my roommates to talk me through it. This followed a

scene in which Lansbury's character reveals a bottomless, unnatural evil; it remains one of the really surprising, appalling, and wonderful moments in my film-going life. The scene's audacity was bolstered by the fact that Lansbury, whose cloying TV series *Murder, She Wrote* was in its first seasons at the time, was the one doing the evil. Reconciling that winsome, vanilla, small-screen sleuth with *The Manchurian Candidate*'s moral-free dragon lady was a challenge my psyche lacked the skills to meet.

Lansbury provided a focus for evil in the original.

Today there's a new version of *The Manchurian Candidate* in the theaters, and in this pivotal role Meryl Streep gives what may be the best performance of her career. Her Eleanor Shaw (slightly updated so that she is a U.S. senator herself, as well as the mother of her party's vice-presidential candidate) holds the audience in the same thrall as the pundits and politicians her character dominates; she walks away with every scene she appears in, her performance treading a thin line between jet-black comedy and believable political horror. She's an amalgamation of every Ann Coulter and Liddle Dole in all of Washington taken to the next level and beyond, and the gap in this woman between the public figure who spouts dogma about keeping America safe and the private, no-bullshit strategist who will do anything to attain her goals is terrifyingly slim. When she consoles her robotized son by saying, "The assassin always dies, baby. It's essential for the national healing," it's a moment of delirious political comedy. The worst that can be said about Streep's career is that her early work, while always proficient, could lack soul. Shaw *has* no soul, and Streep, free to satirize her villainess any way she chooses, takes chances, goes overboard, soars.

The plot, both here and in the original, has a conspiracy at its core: a group of soldiers on detail in Iraq comes up missing, and when they're finally located, two have died. The soldiers report that it was the heroism of a young sergeant named Raymond Shaw that saved the unit, but back in the U.S. they are individually plagued by nightmares in which the scene is played out differently. Among these soldiers is Major Ben Marco; his investigations eventually uncover evidence of a fantastic plot to advance the political interests of a Halliburton-like corporation called Manchurian Global.

The setting of *The Manchurian Candidate* is a just-over-the-hill future in which Americans live in the grip of fear, willing finally to exchange their civil liberties for a perceived safety. And in Manchurian Global, screenwriters Daniel Pyne and Dean Georgaris have found a really witty way to update the Communist scare that drove the original. (In that film, the army unit had been lost in Korea and taken to Communist China for brainwashing.) The platform that the corporation advances politically is one of safeguarding the country from terror — a successful presidential bid is run with the slogan "Secure Tomorrow. Today." — and director Jonathan Demme fills the big screen with small screen images of talking heads who report on the plot developments while terror alerts flash in the corner and news scrolls run along the bottom linking any event with the inevitability of a terrorist connection. Politics have become slightly more stylized; when the president-elect makes his acceptance, the spectacle mounted for the news cameras is inches closer to the opening of a *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* than the status quo, but you can see that that's where we're headed. It's delicious political satire.

And it functions as a thriller, too. (How well the surprises are brought off I'm unsure of, being

familiar with the original.) In the lead, Denzel Washington gives what has become a routinely fine performance, his necessary descent into paranoia conveyed in the deterioration of his professional, soldierly demeanor; in the film's opening scenes he struts in his uniform, but by the end he shuffles. As heroic congressman Shaw, Liev Schreiber vacillates between assurance and a terrifying, boyish vulnerability, and I think that this approach is rather more successful than the cold performance Laurence Harvey gave in the original film. One small part, that of a mysterious surgeon who works for Manchurian Global, played by Simon McBurney, is alarming for the reason that the actor physically resembles Roman Polanski. I wondered if this was a creepy tribute.

Demme is a director who is, in some ways, rising from the ashes. After his Oscar-winning *The Silence of the Lambs*, his films became professional in a way that betrayed some of the loose appeal of his early successes: *Citizen's Band*, *Melvin and Howard*, *Something Wild*. His last film before *The Manchurian Candidate*, 2002's *The Truth about Charlie* was a remake, too (of 1963's *Charade*), and beginning there he's recaptured some of the playful bravura of his early work, but within a big-budget context. Somehow this playfulness is manifested in his reworking of well-known original films; he's toying with our expectations, but still making films that are his own. In *The Manchurian Candidate* there are problems; Demme doesn't play it as cool as director John Frankenheimer did in the original, so that there are too many hallucinations, for instance. And the ending here, as with *The Truth about Charlie*, is a shambles. But comparing him with one of his peers, such as Gus Van Sant, who lost his footing with *Good Will Hunting* and hasn't regained it since, shows a director who is growing into a mature style that promises a lot.

Like *The Stepford Wives*, a question that haunted me before I saw *The Manchurian Candidate* was why remake this movie now? The answer is both on the screen and in the headlines. I attended the film with a Jewish friend who, as a child, narrowly escaped the Holocaust. On the way to the screening we were talking about politics and she told me, "This country is in a critical period right now. People don't realize it. It's as critical a time as Germany in the '30s, and things could end up just as badly." It's worth noting, I think, that this woman didn't read the black humor in *The Manchurian Candidate*, which was what I enjoyed most about the film. "What's so funny?" she asked me afterwards. "It's too real."



***The Village* rolls up it's sidewalk early**

Originally published August 5, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



THOSE WHO WE HAVE NOT SEEN IN FILM: Newcomer Bryce Dallas Howard is especially good as the blind girl Ivy, but plot failings like the village sending a blind girl through the woods stop this pic cold.

I

n the opening scenes of M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village*, the year is given as 1897. This allegedly accounts for the speech of its characters; William Hurt, playing a village elder named Edward Walker, has a particularly awesome first line, something to the effect of, "What spectacle has drawn your attention so splendidly that I should keep it in my pocket with which to better teach?" Or something; it's a humdinger no matter what.

The context for this tongue-twister is that Walker, a school teacher, has found his students circled around the carcass of an animal that has been skinned and left on the ground. The perpetrators of this cruelty, as Walker subsequently explains, are Those We Don't Speak Of (not Those Of Whom We Do Not Speak, as one might expect from a teacher). Later in the film we visit the Old Shed That Is Not To Be Used, and then there's the Color That Keeps You Safe, which is a kind of a mustard shade that theoretically repels Those We Don't Speak Of. We had the word "yellow" in the 19th century — I'm sure we did. And "red": Those We Don't Speak Of wear that color, although I don't recall what phrase is used to describe it, and they're reported to be attracted to it as well.

Later still Lucius (Joaquin Phoenix) asks the half-wit Noah (Adrien Brody), "Is this about Ivy and myself?", "myself" used in place of "me" here not to flout grammatical rules so much as to place the action in the past. For that reason too, contractions are never, ever used. Except in the

phrase Those We Don't Speak Of.

Shyamalan's breakthrough film *The Sixth Sense* aggravated me; watching it, I complained to my friends that Bruce Willis's character wasn't fully drawn. "He has no life," I complained. When the ending arrived, I wasn't sure that its celebrated twist compensated for the central void in the hour and a half that preceded it.

In *The Village* a similar problem presented itself, but since this film is built around its surprise ending, it's difficult to discuss. (Those Who Have Seen It will know what I mean.)

What I can report is that some questions about the film's conception — some very obvious ones, it seems to me — led me to the truth of the movie's conclusion a full hour before the plot got there. Since Shyamalan makes a show of revealing this truth through complicated intercutting, and since I obviously wasn't alone in predicting the obvious, the exposition comes off as embarrassing grandstanding.

It's one of Shyamalan's shortcomings as a director (and as a screenwriter) that he often predicates his films on the gimmick of a twist ending. (And, worse, the success of *The Sixth Sense* caused a glut of similarly gimmicky imitations, such as *Identity* and *Secret Window*.) He has difficulty portraying a believable world beyond that of his characters' immediate circumstances; in *Signs*, for instance, newscasts about alien invasions seemed to be coming not from other countries or cities, but from other realities.

Like *The Others*, his films feel as though they take place in isolation; you want to tell his characters to leave, but there doesn't seem to be any other place for them to go. Because he also tends to withhold information from his audience, the effect his films have is to make you want to shut down the action and demand an explanation. Where are these people? Why are they behaving this way? What do they know that we don't know?

In *The Village* we meet a small population of what appears to be an early American religious community, like those in New England founded by puritans, that is led a group of elders.

The puzzling thing is that the expected religious element is absent; what spiritual talk there is centers on the fragile peace that exists between the villagers and Those We Don't Speak Of, apparent monsters who inhabit the woods that encircle the village.

When an act of jealousy leaves a young man dangerously wounded, his blind girlfriend petitions the elders for permission to traverse the woods to "the towns," there to acquire medicine. (Adding to the fundamentalist feel of the village is talk of how wicked these town-dwellers are.) It's then that the plot complications set in.

How much scarier *The Village* might have been, how much more entertaining, with the straight premise given above is something we'll sadly never know. Suffice it to say that the prospect of a village cut off from civilization by incomprehensible monsters is a juicier prospect than what we're left with as it plays.

The Village is packed with star power. Besides Hurt, Phoenix, and Brody, we find Sigourney Weaver, Michael Pitt, Brendan Gleeson, and many others. Many of these performances are

worthwhile. (Weaver's presence somehow makes the artificial dialogue sound like Woody Allen's from time to time.) A newcomer named Bryce Dallas Howard is especially good as blind Ivy. And the director, in a Hitchcockian touch, shows up in a bit part of himself; I have no comment on this.

But in the end it's all for naught. Shyamalan has planned *The Village* backwards, and my guess is that a lot of the audience is going to experience it that way. And in setting his film in a previous century Shyamalan's violated the first, best advice a writer is likely to receive. You're dying to hear one of his characters say it: Write About That Which You Know Of.



***Napoleon Dynamite* is hilarious and weird**

Originally published August 5, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



THE FINE ART OF WEIRD: Jon Heder's performance as Napoleon is one long confrontation with his co-stars and with the camera; he's a hilarious extrapolation of every put-upon teen. His general air of incomprehension and stupidity is exaggerated by his brusque, sudden movements and by the fact that he never quite gets his mouth closed all the way.

T

he audience at the screening of *Napoleon Dynamite* that I attended died laughing the first time the title character appeared on screen.

He's a high school student, shown standing in his front yard waiting for the school bus, and he's wearing a sky-blue T-shirt on which horses are shown running, tucked into beltless jeans, the jeans tucked into a pair of blue boots of the sort that we used to call moon boots. He's got one of those black plastic wristwatches on his arm, tinted aviator glasses, and he wears his curly red hair in a blob, so that it looks like something has nested on his head.

The yard is sun-blasted and barren — it's just flat earth that some grass grows on — and the

house is a split-level shelter that exists beyond aesthetics of any kind, stuck out by itself in the middle of nowhere. The setting is a small town in Idaho, but on my high school bus route in Goddard there were lots of homes like this one, and you always wondered how it was that someone had made the decision to live in places like these.

That's the whole premise of *Napoleon Dynamite*; it's about a high school experience lived by small-town teenagers who have no options and who try to find a way to fill time where none exists.

The details are exaggerated, but still eerily right. These kids, fending off desperation, make braided keychains, study dance moves off discarded videotapes, run for class office.

Their looks reflect a lack of contact with a bigger world; they make unusual decisions about their hair, for instance, and then decide that maybe what they've come up with is OK.

Their clothing is slightly wrong, like Soviet-era, East German approximations of what they wear in the West.

I was particularly taken with Napoleon's T-shirt collection: there are the horses in the sunset; one on which a helicopter appears to be staging a mountain rescue; a blue one, again with horses, that says ENDURANCE; one that reads "Rick's College"; a red one with wolves; and a festive yellow one depicting a tropical landscape with palm trees on a beach.

Director Jared Hess, who co-wrote with his wife Jerusha, seems to have used bad film as a template for *Napoleon Dynamite*. He presents his characters alone in the middle of the frame, his static camera lingering too long before they speak and too long after. The static tableaux — and the strangeness within them — recall Wes Anderson (*The Royal Tennenbaums*), but the compositions are barer.

The closest analogy may be the animated *Peanuts* films; there's a real connection between Charlie Brown declaiming his lines in his little vacuum and Napoleon standing in the middle of the screen awaiting his bus. In conversations this pacing is deadly — one character speaks, there's a pause, we cut to another character who speaks, then a pause — and this awkward weirdness is one of the funniest things about the film.

Everything Napoleon says is funny (in one scene he asks the school secretary, "Can I borrow you guys's phone for a second?" and I thought I'd die laughing) and it's partly because Hess's bad-movie rhythm lends every line a gravity it wouldn't normally deserve.

But an equal part of it is Jon Heder's performance as Napoleon. He stands with his head down glaring into the camera through nearly-closed eyes and he's put out any time he speaks.

His performance is one long confrontation with his co-stars and with the camera; taking a plate of food out to the family's pet llama he yells, "Tina, come get some ham," and he's a hilarious extrapolation of every put-upon teen. His general air of incomprehension and stupidity is exaggerated by his brusque, sudden movements and by the fact that he never quite gets his mouth closed all the way.

In one scene he's shot with some sort of cobweb or string wafting out of his hair as he stands glowering, and it's almost too much. (A couple of times it is; one character is shown in the cafeteria with food on her face, and the detail is too cruel. And as Napoleon's best friend Pedro, Efren Ramirez has a toupee visited upon him that made me uncomfortable.)

Hess has a weird way with gags. He sets them up and pays them off and they vanish from the film.

Pedro acquires his toupee, for instance, after complaining, a propos of nothing, that he's too hot. When we next see him, he's bald, and he explains that it was his hair that was overheating him and that he shaved it off, and in the next scene his friend Deb (Tina Majorino) is fitting him with his rug. No further explanation arrives.

In another scene, Napoleon throws a fit about his Chapstick, but we never see him use it and he never mentions it again.

Characters likewise disappear; when Napoleon boards his bus, he speaks to a boy we never see again, Napoleon's grandma is introduced and then spends the film elsewhere, etc. The effect isn't episodic so much as weird; it succeeds, marginally, as a tapestry of lives led desultorily, but I want to register the complaint that it's a too-easy effect.

Where *Napoleon Dynamite* really takes flight is in its characters and comic performances, and Hess shows the ability to direct his talented actors so that they fit his ineffably strange vision.

Besides Napoleon, Pedro, and Deb, there's Napoleon's older brother Kip (Aaron Ruell), a timid, baby-faced, 30-something loser who still lives at home and who expresses a desire to be a cage fighter; his Internet girlfriend La Fawnduh (Shondrella Avery), a black woman who dresses Kip up in gangsta attire; and Uncle Rico (Jon Gries), a football star, circa 1982, who arrives to babysit Napoleon and Kip and who so longs to recapture his glory days that he orders a time machine on-line.

None of these characters is an original comic creation, exactly, but in Hess's hands they feel brand new.

His screwy approach is a breath of fresh air in a summer of *Anchormans*; it's a relief to see someone trying something new, and it explains the cult-like devotion of the film's fans.

In its closing scenes, *Napoleon Dynamite* strives to redeem its characters' empty lives through an unexpected victory; it reaches for a lyric coda that doesn't quite work.

You think Hess has lost the film, but then the film's penultimate line ("I caught you a delicious bass," Napoleon tells his girlfriend) captures the effect exactly. It makes you hope that next time out Hess will nail the whole thing.



Avoid *Catwoman* at all costs

Originally published July 29, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



PURR-FECTLY AWFUL: Ludicrous, ridiculous and humiliating are just a few of the words that come to mind after a screening of *Catwoman*.

M

y friend Barbara physically winced the first time Halle Berry, as *Catwoman*, said "purr-fect." I didn't blame her. *Catwoman* takes a talented, beautiful, and powerful actress and puts her through any amount of humiliation: she's miscast, dressed first in frumpy clothes and then in a ridiculous leather outfit with really horrifying makeup, she's asked to deliver lines — and "meows" — that no one could redeem.

It's really painful to watch.

And if Berry's treatment causes you to wince, consider Sharon Stone, invited here to play the part of a cosmetics model who is being replaced by a younger woman. I didn't know how to

react. Surely Stone is a knockout by any standards... Am I mistaken? Maybe an explanation arrived later in the film that clarifies this central plot point, in which case I apologize. I was gone by then.

You don't need me to explain to you how bad a film *Catwoman* is. A child could do it. It thus defeats in some ways my function as a critic, but I'll tell you a little bit about my favorite parts just the same.

The plot of *Catwoman* is that Berry's character, an illustrator at a cosmetics company, stumbles upon an evil scheme being concocted by her wicked boss and is then killed. (This scheme, by the way, is that the company plans on introducing to the market a facial cream that is physically addictive and that turns beautiful women into scarred monsters if they stop using it.)

At the moment of her death, Berry interacts with a special cat in some way so that she's reborn as the title character, a feline-like woman who can leap and cling to things and cut her own hair stylishly and apply the ghastly makeup mentioned above. In this guise, I assume, she battles her former boss and halts the production of the evil facial cream, although I really don't know for sure since, as I said, I left.

Before her transformation, Berry encounters Benjamin Bratt, a police detective who then becomes her love interest. Berry wins Bratt over, for the most part, by kicking his ass in a game of one-on-one basketball so embarrassing that both Barbara and I thought we would have to climb behind our chairs and kind of just peek out over them to watch it. Berry hadn't said "purr-fect" yet, and although I wanted to leave right then, Barbara told me I had to wait until the first fight scene was over before I could go. (She also expressed an interest in seeing the face of actress Alex Borstein, who plays Berry's best friend, and who uses the evil facial cream, melt off. But we didn't.)

The scene that we left just after was one in which Berry, newly transformed into Catwoman, and having just put an end to a party in her building that was too loud, interrupts a jewel heist and beats the daylight out of the robbers.

I literally wanted to die during this scene; watching Berry strike computer-enhanced poses along the walls of the jewelry store while dodging the robbers' bullets was more humiliation than I thought I could bear. This, too, is where she says "purr-fect"; she's crouched down on a balcony with her arms thrown out along her sides when she says it, and she rolls the "r" as you expect she would, and the whole effect of her makeup, hair, ludicrous costume, and ridiculous pose was what led Barbara to wince.

My wince came earlier on, not when Berry's gay co-worker at the cosmetics factory perks up and bats his eyes at Bratt, and not when I first understood that Berry had been saddled with the sort of blowsy, distracted, unplayable character that really only Diane Keaton might have pulled off. My chief moment of discomfort came when Bratt, glancing at Berry's portfolio of blobby, post-modern paintings and sketches, remarks that they recall "early Chagall," that they were both "elegant" and another adjective I was too astonished to repeat into my little tape recorder, and that they also magically caused him to reminisce about the "old Dutch masters."

Some people know what early Chagalls look like, even if neither the screenwriter nor Bratt's

character does. Barbara and I do, but that's not the real reason we ran from the theater. It was the humiliation; really we did it for Halle Berry and, to a lesser extent, Sharon Stone. It's not fair; they don't deserve it. On behalf of these women, we ask you not to attend.



The Beast is local camp time travel

Originally published July 22, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



THE BEAST FROM LBJ-ERA WICHITA: This Friday, After nearly 40 years, the obscure ICT-made monster flick *The Beast from the Beginning of Time* screens at the Orpheum Theatre. Come meet director Tom "Major Astro" Leahy!

N

ear the end of a hard day's work, two archeologists make a startling discovery in their dig: a human, or possibly proto-human, hand, mysteriously lodged into the shale in which they're digging. Or do I mean "chipping"? This is solid stone, and the body (as it turns out to be) that the archeologists have uncovered is thus that much more of a mystery. It's not a skeleton; not only is

it still "spongy," as one of the scientists puts it, it's still got its hair. Carbon dating reveals it to be 60 million years old, and further investigation leads to the discovery of a strange wound on its head. What could this thing be?

The terrifying answer is that it's *The Beast from Beginning of Time*.

Filmed in Wichita in 1965, *The Beast* is one of those locally-made horror entries — like *The Attic* or *Leif Jonker's Darkness* — that has always seemed to exist more in rumor than on the screen, a movie you're likely to hear about but seldom have the chance to see. A rare chance to glimpse this monster is being offered at the Orpheum Theatre this Friday, July 23 at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are \$5; \$4 for seniors, students and military.

Tom Leahy, best known to Wichitans as Major Astro, wrote and directed *The Beast from the Beginning of Time* — "if you want to call it directing," he told me when I talked to him a few days ago about the film.

"We all just did our jobs." Leahy explained that the movie was shot on 16mm with television in mind, and that it was financed by KSNW Ch. 3 in hopes that it could be sold to other stations. It wasn't — Leahy says that the sale wasn't very aggressively pursued — with the result that *The Beast* never much saw the light of day.

With all due respect to Leahy and his cast, that may have been a good thing. Not to say that *The Beast from the Beginning of Time* isn't a blast, only that — like *Empire of the Ants* and *Night of the Blind Dead* — it's the kind of movie that gets a lot better with the passing of time.

The plot progresses thusly: once chipped from its stone tomb, the strange creature the scientists have discovered is found to be not dead, but in a kind of suspended animation. Local theater doyen Dick Welsbacher plays chief archeologist Bernard Maury, and it's he who is given the unenviable task of explaining how it is that this thing has survived while entombed in solid rock: "Chemicals in the shale, I'd imagine." Lightning provides the key to the beast's reanimation, but, as you're likely to have guessed, our heroes find out too late that their humanoid would just as soon kill you as say hello.

Besides Welsbacher (whose character is surprisingly nasty, and who is done in by a filing cabinet), the cast includes such local talent as Webb Smith, Ralph Seely, Marc Clark, Dusty Herring, and Suzanne Frarrar. Leahy himself (acting under the pseudonym "Nelson Strong") played the beast, a kind of *Trog*-like caveman with a prominent forehead, flared nostrils, and a generally unrested look.

I asked Leahy about his costume. "What costume?" he asked. "We used make-up, some artificial dentures to give the thing sort of protruding lips, some nose putty on the forehead." He went on to describe to me how the film was shot nights over the course of a summer, with next to no money, not enough lights, and cameramen and interiors provided by his employers at Channel 3.

Just hearing him describe it caused a fond nostalgia for me, since I associate this kind of B-movie creature feature with the pleasures of long summer evenings. In that sense, and in its camp appeal, *The Beast from the Beginning of Time* has a lot to offer.

And what about that camp? Does Leahy have a sense of humor about it? Both he and Welsbacher will be on hand at the Orpheum on Friday. Attend, and you can ask them yourselves.

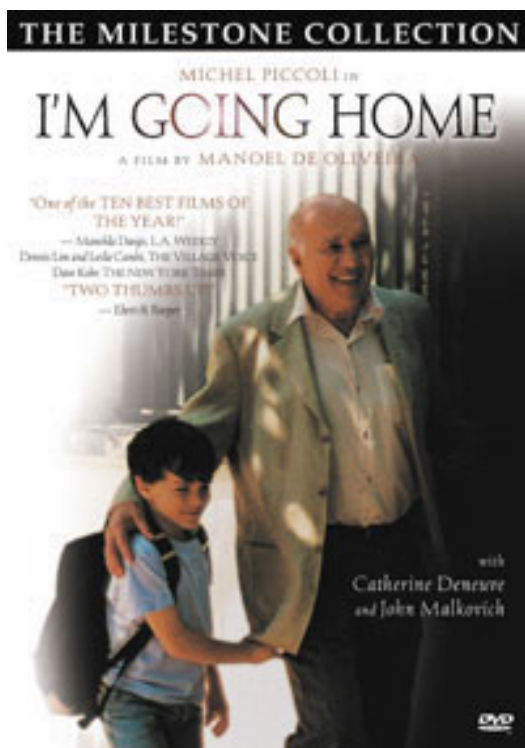


Deeper into DVD

Back in the Real World

Originally published July 22, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



>*See It*

What *I'm Going Home*

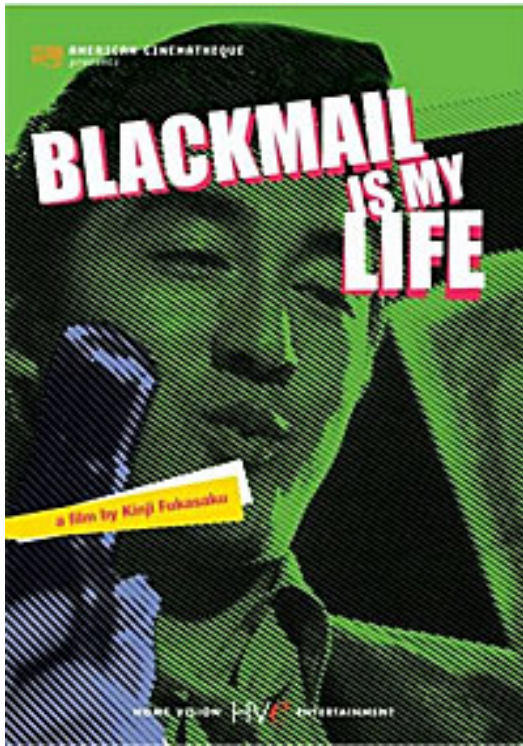
Rating F5



> *See It*

What *Unknown Pleasures*

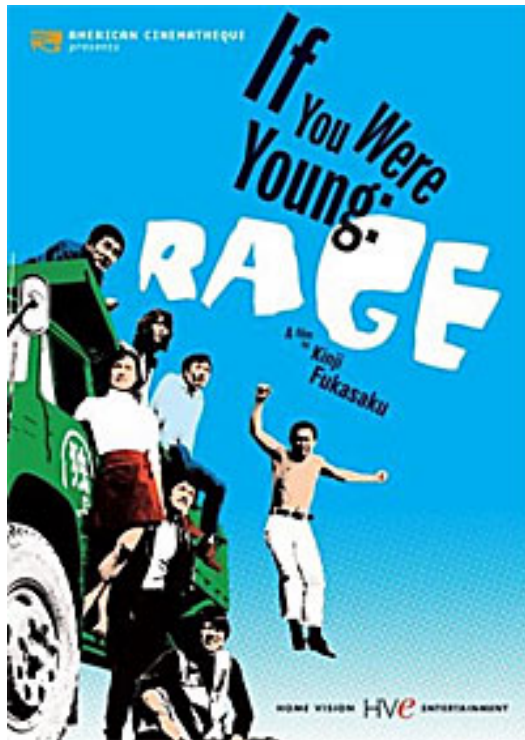
Rating F5



> *See It*

What *Blackmail is my Life*

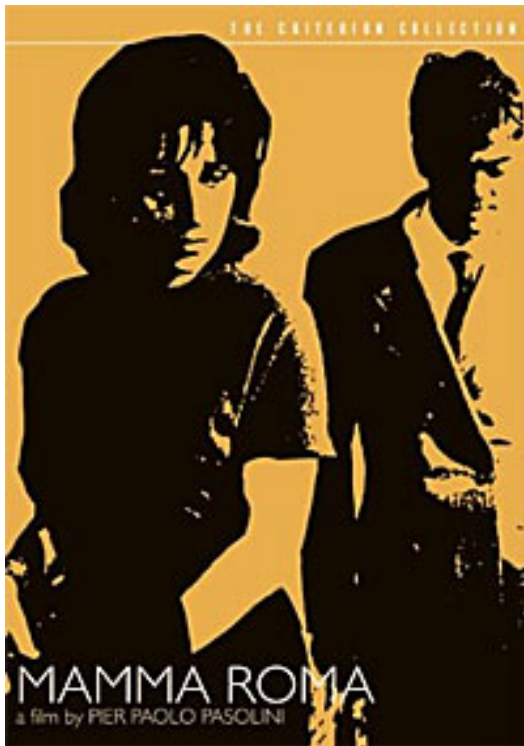
Rating F3



> *See It*

What *If You Were Young: Rage*

Rating F2



>See It

What *Momma Roma*

Rating F4

Imaging life without a DVD player becomes more and more difficult this summer as the offerings at the cineplex get worse and worse; giving up my DVDs now would be like going without air-conditioning. (A friend of mine is fond of telling me that the pioneers didn't have air-conditioning and that they somehow managed. Never mind that the pioneers didn't have, say, antibiotics, either; they didn't have *Jean-Luc Godard*. What kind of existence is that?)

The big-screen this summer offers less and less that has to do with our day-to-day lives, provided, of course, that we're not engaged in a futuristic battle with computer-generated foes in an alternate reality existing side-by-side with our own. If you're reading this, I'll assume you're not; and if that's the case, the small screen has a couple of outstanding new releases that may have some bearing on your life.

The highlight of these is the Milestone edition of Manoel de Oliveira's wonderful *I'm Going Home* (F5). This 2002 film was made when the director was 92 years-old, and his age is reflected both in the wisdom of the film and the director's serene, unhurried style. *I'm Going Home* tells the story of a 76-year-old Parisian actor named Gilbert Valence who, in the film's opening scenes, loses his wife and daughter in an auto crash. Fast forward to a few weeks later, and we see

Valence reestablishing a routine in his life and patiently tending to his orphaned grandson Serge. When an American director casts Valence as the much, much younger Buck Mulligan in a screen adaptation of *Ulysses*, the forced scrutiny of his age causes a crisis in Valence's careful life.

The content of *I'm Going Home* is heartbreaking (but never sentimental), but it's the film's extraordinary, minimalist style that you can't forget. No other film exactly compares. de Oliveira fixes his camera and waits for action to move into it, he records conversations silently through shop and cafe windows, he shows us the feet of speakers rather than their faces, he chronicles the progress of the *Ulysses* shoot by showing us the face of the director, who reacts to action we don't see. It's an amazing, patient film.

Patience is the key to Zhang Ke Jia's 2002 release *Unknown Pleasures* (F5) as well. Zhang has been identified as one of China's most gifted new directors, and watching *Unknown Pleasures* it's easy to see why. In capsule form, the plot sounds unappealing: two urban kids kill time in pool halls, discos, and at outdoor concerts, where one falls for a dancer who is pimped out by her agent, a small-time gangster. Inspired by Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, the two attempt a half-assed robbery with predictably dire results. The movie is bigger than this schematic implies, though, and like the best of recent Iranian film it manages the trick of being specific and universal simultaneously. When Zhang, in long, uninterrupted takes, shows his bored, despondent protagonists riding their motorcycle through the wasteland of contemporary, urban China, we get a steady look at youth's restlessness — one of film's most persistent themes, welcome or no — here filtered through the ugly immediacy of day-to-day life in China. Youth everywhere is much the same, Zhang says. But for these kids, the pleasures of the title — as transient as pop songs and as distant as the mysterious USA — are likely to remain unknown.

A pair of Japanese films by legendary director Kinji Fukasaku (a favorite of Tarantino's and maker of 2000's notorious and apparently undistributable *Battle Royale*), recently released on DVD, place the out-of-reach in postwar Japan. Spurred by the economic miracle that transformed that country after its defeat, Japan's youth relocated to the cities in record numbers in the 1960s, only to find, according to Fukasaku, that the promised abundance was running dry. In 1968's *Blackmail is my Life* (F3) and 1970's *If You Were Young: Rage* (F2), Fukasaku tells the story of two very different sets of young people — the first petty criminals, the second aspiring dump truck owners — who fight against the confines of the establishment to no avail. Both movies are compendiums of wild, unbridled technique, filled to bursting with cinematic sleight-of-hand: flashbacks, flash forwards, freeze-frames, jump cuts, and insane continuity. But of the two, *Blackmail* is by far the most successful; it's loose and stylish, and watching it with friends is a blast. Starring matinee idol Hiroki Matsukata (he jumps around naked in the film's opening scenes as though clothes could not contain him), the movie tells, in an anecdotal, next-episode style, of a group of hoods who want to break out of the no-win role that society has made for them. They don't; the film's downbeat conclusion puts an end to that. But the race to the end is a pleasurable ride, with an off-the-cuff, edge-of-the-70s buzz.

And, finally, the Criterion Collection checks in on the postwar experience of another Axis power in Pier Paolo Pasolini's remarkable *Mamma Roma* (F4). Set in his native Italy, *Mamma Roma* was made by Pasolini in 1961, 14 years before he let loose what I hope is the most horrifying and disturbing movie yet made: *Salo, or The 120 Days of Sodom*. I write "I hope" above because I couldn't willingly share the planet with anything more sadistic or brutal in the arts. It seemed like

a continuation of the atrocities when the director was murdered the following year by a teenage street hustler; the tawdry crime was splashed on the headlines of Italy's yellow press, complete with speculation that the killing was a political assassination and an emphasis on the director's taste for young men.

The sensation that followed later in Pasolini's career makes *Mamma Roma* all the more fascinating. As played by Anna Magnani, this Mamma Roma is an earthy, fun-loving prostitute who vows to better herself when she takes custody of her teenage son. It's a melodrama — a love from Mamma's past blackmails her back onto the streets, and her son, heeding clues to his mother's vocation, turns to petty crime himself — but it's melodrama with a different message and a strange didactic bent. Pasolini condemns his character not for selling her body, but for striving to better her class, and the legacy of Fascism in which the film plays out underlines the dangers of such conformity. Pasolini, though, is thinking about it harder than you need to; *Mamma Roma*, fueled by Magnani's magnetic central performance and the director's innovative style, is a rich film experience that will take you as deep — or not — as you care to go. Criterion has tricked the set out in extras that place the film, and the director, in context; included is the short film *La ricotta*, an indictment of Italy's relationship to the church so effective that Pasolini was sentenced to prison for having made it.

And *that's* filmmaking that touches lives.



***Anchorman* has bits of gold**

Originally published July 15, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



STAY CLASSY, SAN DIEGO: *Anchorman* really nailed the details of the '70s but the film doesn't quite match the talent of the actors.

T

he title is a play on a documentary on a real '70s icon: *Porn Star: The Legend of Ron Jeremy*. Jeremy, as the title suggests, made his living selling sex, and the makers of *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* want you to know that in the decade when a watered-down version of the hippies' "free love" ethic permeated the middle class, reading the news and selling sex were in many ways the same thing. And it was largely men doing the selling; although we now take a woman's workplace equality for granted, it wasn't until Barbara Walters, as I recall, that female journalists were allowed to cover more than fluff on the evening news.

Like everything else in the '70s, sexiness bore a double standard. One of the most successful period jokes in *Anchorman* is the film's insistence that Will Ferrell, playing the titular superstar anchor for San Diego's KVWN, is sexy.

He's not: he's a horrifying buffoon and chauvinist, with a fat, hairy stomach, a terrifying hairdo, a groomed mustache of the sort that later came to signify that its wearer was gay, and a wardrobe — featuring polyester suits (often burgundy themselves) and ghastly striped ties — that was grotesque even then. I remember.

In the '70s men like these wore their sense of entitlement with the same smug assurance as their reeking colognes. (One of the film's funniest scenes involves a cologne called Sex Panther — "It's made of bits of pure panther" — that smells like gasoline and that clears a newsroom of its gagging personnel; some of us — those who remember Hai Karate and Tonga — may find this

funnier and more painful than others.)

But in the '70s, Burgundy, like the similarly hirsute Jeremy, would have been given a pass. At least his newsroom cronies find him attractive, and the more they can be like him the better. It's a clubhouse atmosphere; the guys celebrate their continued winning streak in the ratings, for instance, by chugging Scotch poolside at a friend's, Burgundy parading around in his BVDs, oafishly hitting on women, and regaling the assembled with cannonballs. The world, inexplicably, is their oyster, just as it would have been in real life.

When the network, seeking diversity, hires the driven, can-do, and *actually* sexy Veronica Corningstone (Christine Applegate) as Burgundy's co-anchor, this threatened group of locker room hooligans senses their party coming to an end.

That's the premise of *Anchorman* and it's a good one; it's hard to think of a group that more richly deserves lampooning than those flatulent '70s talking heads.

Ferrell (who co-wrote with director Adam McKay) nails Burgundy from the opening scenes, conveying total self-deception and a vacuity that seemingly has no bottom. He doesn't abandon his preening, sham "class" even in conversation with his dog, and his phony show of interest in the news he's reading is comic gold.

Ferrell sometimes takes things too far — he doesn't seem able to resist occasionally reaching into the sophomorically broad, a liability he likely developed by working in front of a live audience — and director McKay is too much in his performer's thrall to prevent it. The same could be said for David Koechner, who plays sports reporter Champ Kind; his character is broad to begin with, and he overplays it.

But a few of the supporting performances are terrific, particularly Paul Rudd as field reporter Brian Fantana (his look is dead-on parody; with his upturned nose and friendly eyes he recalls '70s supporting actor John Beck, circa *Rollerball*, constantly) and Vince Vaughn as rival newscaster Wes Mantooth, the last name no doubt an homage to Emergency's Randolph Mantooth, a prime '70s example of the 98-pound weakling cast against type as a manly man. Steve Carell is often funny as a weatherman with an IQ in the 40s, but his is a one-joke character, and we know that he's capable of more.

The surprise is Christina Applegate. Her character is ambivalently written in *Anchorman*: she's meant to be read as both hard-working and more intelligent than the men around her, but also, on some levels, just as vapid. She succeeds — you can see both the grasping climber and the sincere journalist in her. Her exasperation with the sexist clowning of her peers is perfect; she acts as though she's amazed that they would behave this way, although really she expects them to.

My exasperation is with the laziness of the conception. *Anchorman* follows the schematic of every *Saturday Night Live*-derived screen comedy of the last two decades to a tee. When Veronica falls in love with Ron, you expect her to even as you're hoping that Farrell and McKay can come up something new, and the action falls in line from there. *Anchorman* doesn't test any limits or try for anything more than a retread. (When it does reach, it goes in the wrong direction. Jokes about Burgundy revealing that he's an accomplished jazz flautist, for instance, don't fit the talentless character. And there's a rumble among different San Diego news teams that violates the

agreed-on reality of the movie; it feels like footage from another film.)

Anchorman is very funny sometimes (and sometimes whether or not the gags fly is a matter of luck, just as it often is on SNL), and its period detail is hilarious, abetted fantastically by Alex Wurman's C.H.i.P.s.-like score. But there's so much talent on hand that you couldn't blame anyone for wanting a little more.



White Chicks apparently not from Earth

Originally published July 8, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



NATURAL BEAUTY: Yeah, uh, sure ... this doesn't look anything like a black man dressed as a white woman. It looks like a black man dressed as a clown. Or alien.

A

friend of mine tells me that once, during the '80s, he saw a Michael Jackson video game in which players fought crime by dancing. This is hilarious to us.

Watching the new Wayans' brothers comedy *White Chicks* the other night, I thought for a minute

that I was seeing a similar thing, and the fact is I'm still not sure if I did or not.

The scene in question involves a kind of a dance-off between competing groups of young, upper-middle class white women, a war being waged for the attention of a certain young man who's in the crowd at the club where this dance-off takes place. Watching these sexy young women defiantly executing synchronized, choreographed routines at one another with grimly competitive expressions on their faces, you naturally wish to see it as a joke — it's too freaking ridiculous otherwise — yet beyond the concept, nothing else about the scene is funny.

As comedy it's so flat you can't read its intentions. As drama it's too absurd to describe.

White Chicks tells the story of two incompetent African-American FBI agents (Shawn and Marlon Wayans) who go undercover as effete white socialite girls to solve a kidnapping.

Reading this synopsis, you know every joke in advance; you've seen it over and over again in films of such various merit as *Some Like It Hot* and *Just One of the Guys*. The update here is that our heroes swap not just sex but race, both concepts having been done before, although not, in my recollection, together.

The funniest joke in the film, to give you an idea, occurs when an uptight black man says, "Negro, please" in lieu of the more forceful common phrase. The worst, if it actually *is* a joke, is the dance scene described above.

Most of *White Chicks* is unfunny, but its biggest problem is that it's *weird*. A glance at the previews reveals the cause: the Wayans, done up in their casual, rich-girl drag, don't look like white women. They don't look like *Earth* women. They have eyes like huskies and Max Factor skin; even a child will have seen enough movies to sense that these scary creatures should be turning into wolves rather than shopping for Fendi at the mall.

Of course, Al Jolson wasn't convincing as a black man, either.

The difference is that no one expected him to be. In *White Chicks*, the Wayans are impersonating a specific pair of white women, and they're doing so among the women's friends. When other characters greet them normally within the film ("You've changed something," one of them notes, thus coming closest to unmasking the agents), you begin to wonder if you've had a stroke.

Normally we would be asked in a comedy such as this to sit through a scene in which the impostors are forced to spontaneously bluff in order to fool their "acquaintances." Here so much is taken on faith that director Keenen Ivory Wayans scarcely even bothers with that.

But then ultimately it's hard to know who to blame for these thematic shortcomings, seeing as how there are no fewer than six writers credited with having written *White Chicks*. (Three more created the "story.") In no instance — literally none that I can recall — has a large number of screenwriters resulted in a better script. On the contrary, a surfeit of writers is generally symptomatic of an badly conceived film.

Even so, in the case of *White Chicks*, you're left wondering what these six men actually did to earn their checks. There's a kind of a plot, beyond even what I described in a single sentence

above, about a pair of evil society women whose father is secretly bankrupt, and there are a few funny lines.

But leaving the theater, you're more keenly aware of what wasn't there than what was. A few hours later, I mostly remembered a void.

And, of course, I remember the otherworldly appearance of the Wayans in the leads.

In their performances, neither manages much in *White Chicks*; they impersonate women badly, and they never manage the bitchy, Upper East Side stereotype they need to make their characters work. The jokes they're given are mostly of the kind where they reflexively behave like men when subjected to injustices or when ogled by other men. Why other men *would* ogle them remains a mystery, since the two at their most alluringly feminine would be about as attractive to straight men, I would think, as Rowan Atkinson and Ice-T.

Near the end of *White Chicks*, one of our intrepid, skirted agents appears onstage before an audience at a fashion show, only to find the woman as whom he has been masquerading unexpectedly sharing the stage. The two regard one another, nonplussed, the (actual) woman having had no idea that she has had a doppelgaenger inhabiting her life. Her reaction is huge — she screams and possibly faints (I don't recall and don't actually care) — and the audience is likewise aghast. Strange, this reaction, since the two in fact look nothing alike.

Is there a joke here, maybe an obverse to that old white racist chestnut "they all look the same"? Or is that the film is so out-of-synch with its realities that the audience is expected to accept a resemblance that their own eyes — and common sense — disprove?

Trying to answer that question lands us back at the fiercely waged dance-off with its ambivalent tone.

Either the filmmakers intended a joke without developing it enough to make their intentions plain (don't even ask about the Troma-quality outcome of a gag in which one of the agents is lactose intolerant but enjoys a little quiche at a party just the same), or they tried to get by on make-up, good intentions, and a willingness on the audience's part to close one eye, squint, and think, "Oh, maybe I can see it in profile."

As for me, the answer is that I don't care.

Rating F1

Short review Unfunny, but the biggest problem is that the Wayans, done up in their casual, rich-girl drag, don't look like white women. They don't look like *Earth* women. Totally forgettable aside from the scary appearance of the leads.



Fahrenheit 9/11 an improvement for Moore

Originally published July 1, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



Michael Moore talking with Congressman John Tanner (D-TN) on Capitol Hill. He spent a day there approaching pro-war members of Congress to recruit their children to fight in Iraq.

I

dislike Michael Moore's films. Because his films are political, people tend to become defensive or angry with me when I say that: maybe I'm a Republican or something. I'm not. I'm in the ACLU. When it can be plainly discerned, Moore's political position is usually something I'm on board for.

It's Moore the filmmaker (and to some extent Moore the individual, as revealed in his films) that I have qualms about. I don't like his sense of humor, and the rambling structure of his movies annoys me. He's self-aggrandizing while pretending to humility. He can likewise be cruel to anyone who appears before his camera — notably the bank employees in *Bowling for Columbine* — while characterizing himself as the working man's champion. He misleads his interviewees about his intentions. And I'm almost literally driven mad by the pretense, mostly abandoned in his new film *Fahrenheit 9/11*, that what he makes are "documentaries."

Worse, he employs film dishonestly to achieve his ends. When Rush Limbaugh distorts facts or draws false conclusions or lets half-truths slide, the hue and cry from the left is deafening. When Moore does the same — as he did in the remarkably unscrupulous *Bowling for Columbine* — the

ends are somehow seen to justify the means. Why?

Fahrenheit 9/11 represents an improvement, but not so great a one that the applause at the end didn't irk me. The film's tighter structure mostly does away with the impression that the director is reaching for any reaction he can get. (In *Bowling for Columbine* this phenomenon resulted in a confused message that his supporters construed as openness.) But the inclusion of horrific footage from Iraq counters it just as surely. I too believe that America is engaged in an unjust war in Iraq, and I feel that our president's motives for declaring it are evilly self-serving. But the inclusion of that footage seems to me to be self-serving too. Moore makes his point, but it feels to me as though he invades the private, unimaginable suffering of others to do so.

This, as I say, is how I *feel* about this footage, but Moore invites my feelings about it — as opposed to my intellectual evaluation of his arguments — by including it. It provokes our horror, just as images of outrageously done-up drag queens are used to provoke the horror of the right when the issue is gay acceptance instead. It's an essentially anti-humanist form of coercion.

This anti-humanism — or non-humanism — is at the core of my objections to Moore. I feel that he uses people as tools to achieve his ends while positioning himself as a man of great compassion. These ends, in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, aren't so much to unseat the president as to present Michael Moore as the force that's unseated the president. He's not a great thinker, either, and I suppose it would thus be amusing, in a demoralizing way, if his sloppy reasoning ultimately *were* the cause, the triumph of a buffoon over a dimwit in a confederacy of dunces.

My colleague Jason Bailey offered me the chance to dissent on the subject of *Fahrenheit 9/11*: an incredible act of generosity, since he's the one putting his positive feelings on the line. But then writing a favorable review of a film is always a braver act than writing a bad one. Jason's is a much more generous sensibility than mine in a lot of ways. When he goes to *Raising Helen*, for example, he honestly hopes he'll like it. And that's an improvement on me *and* Michael Moore.



Charming *Baadasssss!* an insight to controversy

Originally published July 1, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



SHUTYOURMOUTH: Mario Van Peebles stars in *Baadasssss!* as his real-life father trying to make *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* a movie that would go on to ignite the '70s blacksploitation craze.

I

n 1971, Melvin Van Peebles changed the history of motion pictures with the release of his film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. An independent feature, *Sweetback* told the story of black America's rage from the viewpoint of black America — something that had never happened before — and although it was a rough piece of filmmaking, badly scripted and acted, and with no production values at all, it filled a yawning need in American film and went on to become the highest grossing independent feature of its day.

Sweetback opened with a scene that no studio would touch still today: an obviously prepubescent boy is invited into the bed of a grown woman and is shown having sex with her. "You've got a sweet back," she croons to the boy; flash forward to the present, and although it's now a man atop the woman, the nickname has stuck and our hero has been given his sobriquet. The boy in the scene was Van Peebles's son Mario; now he's grown into manhood himself, and in the film *Baadasssss!* he pays tribute to his driven, visionary, and sometimes rather crazy dad.

In *Baadasssss!*, Van Peebles the Younger portrays Van Peebles the Elder as he sets about getting his film made against substantial odds. (A very real, close physical resemblance between the two Van Peebles helps.)

The story is a good one. Melvin was a successful studio filmmaker who gave up a three-picture

contract with Columbia to pursue his dream of making a movie that, according to its credits, starred "the Black Community and Brer Soul" and that was dedicated "to all the Brothers and Sisters who had enough of The Man."

Because technicians' unions had necessarily to be misled, he masqueraded his film as pornography while shooting it, and when his meager financing fell through, Bill Cosby, of all people, picked up a substantial part of the tab.

For the soundtrack an unknown group named Earth Wind and Fire was hired for a pittance. Because the Screen Actors Guild wouldn't allow its members to participate in the production, Van Peebles was forced into the lead role himself.

And the lily-white MPAA, shocked at the explicit sexual content (not to mention the recurring appearance of Van Peeble's penis), slapped the finished work with a financially-crippling X rating. But the film plugged into a zeitgeist, and the rest is history.

Sweetback, as mentioned, was made on a shoestring, and much of the charm of *Baadasssss!* derives from its similar economies. Probably Mario, like his father, didn't have much money to work with, but part of me hopes that the decision was aesthetic, that the son consciously sought to echo the extemporaneous camerawork and provisional sets his father had used. (In transitions and in the enjoyable title sequence he dissolves his images into psychedelic color like that used in much of *Sweetback*.) The acting is far more polished in *Baadasssss!* — there's no way it couldn't have been — and the film employs a sophisticated interview style that one suspects Melvin would have found "boring."

But what's most disarming about *Baadasssss!* is the way that it recounts an explosively controversial chapter in film history — even in American history — and renders it in personal terms. It's a privileged view of a public moment; Mario's made a valentine to his father that's both touching and surprisingly *charming*. *Sweetback* ended with an on-screen epitaph about a "nigger who would be back to settle some dues." Thirty years later, *Baadasssss!* is an unexpectedly loving coda.



***Riddick* a garish, nutty success**

Originally published June 24, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



WONDERFULLY ENTERTAINING: Bad taste, bad dialog and bad dudes add up to a great movie full of inovative action and down right avant-garde style.



YOU GOT THE LOOK: *The Chronicles of Riddick* has its own look that, while using the same wardrobe as every dingy modern sci-fi flick, borrows more from video game effects than film.



If you're looking for a useful lesson in racial tolerance, my advice is to chuck your *Amistad* and *The Color Purple* DVDs right out the car window and go see *The Chronicles of Riddick* instead.

While the Spielberg films flaunt their noble good intentions to an audience that can then feel good about itself for agreeing, *Riddick* quietly goes about doing what I wish more films did: plays its multi-racial cast with so little concern for issues of color that a true color-blindness emerges.

Race is not an issue in *Riddick* because no one involved with the film seems to have given it a thought. Audiences are thus not required to, either, with the result that the equality presented on the screen can be taken for granted by the filmmakers and their audience alike.

The film's treatment of women is a different matter, but it wasn't its position on social issues that I loved *The Chronicles of Riddick* for anyway. What held me to this sequel to David Twohy's 2000 *Pitch Black* was its inventive action sequences, of which there are a plethora, and its extravagant, redeeming bad taste.

Parts of *The Chronicles of Riddick* travel so far into uncharted waters that they could be mistaken for the work of David Lynch (specifically *Dune*) or the avant-garde noodlings of Guy Maddin. And in its willingness to take its stylistic profligacy to extremes, it reminded me of nothing so much as Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*.

Throne of Blood was an adaptation of *Macbeth*, and although I'm likely to lose my credibility for it, I want to mention that *Riddick* in a couple of spots reminded me of Shakespeare, too. Some of these echoes are incidental, such as the presence of a conniving Lady Macbeth character (Thandie Newton, as Dame Vaako), but the film's climactic battle between Riddick and a self-anointed god (Colm Feore, as Lord Marshal) has the ring of a marooned-in-space *Hamlet* to it. And the film's indelible closing shot — a beautifully composed tableau in which our hero, sprawled across the throne to which he's just ascended, receives the unwanted tribute of his new subjects — gives the world a marvelous new visualization of tragedy.

The Chronicles of Riddick is a wonderful film, but it's probably an aberration. Twohy, who is approaching 50, and whose most recent works were *Pitch Black* and 2002's claustrophobic *Below*, has shown a slight gift for suspense in the past (the latter film, for example, despite its thin budget and off-putting insularity, generated the occasional dread), but the crazy doggedness he brings to *Riddick* is something that nothing in his filmography had prepared me for, and it's probably mostly luck that brought it together as it is.

The lessons Twohy takes from his work here will probably be the wrong ones, too; by this I mean that if the director aims for tastefulness or restraint — if he tries to rein in his instincts in the interest of making a more "acceptable" or traditional product — he's done for. *The Chronicles of Riddick* triumphs in its relentless pursuit of a crazy vision. Traditional notions of accomplishment aren't what it's about.

The Chronicles of Riddick is a sequel in the most nominal imaginable way. In the title role, Vin

Diesel reprises his character from *Pitch Black*, an unconquerable warrior from a planet whose race is all but dead. He lives as a desperado with a price on his head, but he is summoned nonetheless to prevent the takeover of the planet Helion by Necromongers, a quasi-Christian group who travel from solar system to solar system wiping out all who do not convert to their faith. (Helion, interestingly, looks a lot like this planet's Middle East.) Before he is able to conquer the Necromongers, however, Riddick must rescue his beloved Kyra (Alexa Davalos), a child when he last saw her, from the prison planet of Crematoria.

If the plot sounds a tad unexciting, there's a good reason for that, and the screenplay isn't far behind. (Sample dialogue might include that of a bounty hunter who tells his crew, "Throw on a fresh pair of panties. Let's get this right.") The performances, likewise, are not all roses, and I was initially agonized at the appearance of Dame Judi Dench as an "Elemental," a being with the ability to both glide and infallibly calculate odds.

In the lead, Diesel functions more as a physical presence than an actor; he's machine-like, with an inhumanly giant physique, glowing eyes, and a racial makeup that's somehow neutral in its illegibility. Everything about him — as Riddick and as an actor, from his charming smile to his acquired screen name — seems manufactured.

Yet as entertainment, *The Chronicles of Riddick* succeeds on its own willfully preposterous terms.

What holds you in the film is its lunatic commitment to its non-stop action pieces and the thoughtful and original execution of same. Within battles, Twohy distorts screen movement so that action alternately repeats within frames or is telescoped into a flash; Lord Marshal, in particular, moves with the speed of light here, but dynamically, as opposed to invisibly as in *Interview with the Vampire* or the like. Having introduced this convention, Twohy goes to the extraordinary — "extraordinary" in terms of brain-dead effects films like these — of using it within the plot, so that Lord Marshal's downfall is linked to his out-of-body movements.

The highlight of *Riddick* is a battle for control of a spaceship at the mouth of a cave on the planet Crematoria; the action in this scene is clear despite the manipulations of the director, and imaginative conception and free-for-all pacing actually justify, for once, the computer-generated effects. Only the Wachowskis, in their *Matrix* films, have incorporated so much digitized effect so successfully. One way to put it would be to say that it rocks.

The look of *The Chronicles of Riddick* is new to the screen (although our junior critic Johnny Szlauderbach tells me that it's common to computer games).

That's not to say that it's *original*; the topography of Crematoria, for instance, is lifted directly from Frazetta, and the wardrobe is the same dingy futuristic uniform we see in a new release every week.

But the film's look is distinct from the pasteurized fantasy of Industrial Light and Magic and its imitators, to which we've all become far too familiar, and architecturally the sets are insanely grandiose, like the work of a younger, crazier Albert Speer.

It's tacky, and sometimes cheap looking, but eventually even these shortcomings grew on me,

and I began to look forward to the day when the film will invoke a precise nostalgia for the trash of the new millennium the way *The Goonies* does now for youngish audiences who wish to recall the '80s.

None of this would matter much if the film weren't a good ride, and the first few minutes of it left me unpersuaded; I assumed, based on the evidence of all the effects-laden zeppelins that have been crashing into theaters since *The Matrix*, that *The Chronicles of Riddick* was another dangerous bag of gas.

But it kept my attention, even given its hell-for-leather pacing, which generally tires me, and by the time the aforementioned spaceship battle took place I found that I wasn't willing to look away. (This sequence is conceived of so daringly that I would have accepted it as the work of an avant-gardist, something that might have come from the new Austrian school and played at Black Maria.) I grant its detractors that *The Chronicles of Riddick* may not be a fully intentional success. But it's a garish, nutty, virtuoso entertainment just the same.



***The Stepford Wives* is offensively tame**

Originally published June 24, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



POISE, NOT POISON: Glen Close falls flat as a menacing robot wife that isn't actually menacing.

W

hen the original *The Stepford Wives* opened in 1974, feminism was a front-page issue in America. The film's intent was to exploit those headlines — it was the first horror treatment of the issue of women's rights, an unappealing if inevitable development — and it premised its thrills on the extent to which American men would go to keep women in their places. Since then, women have left the proverbial kitchen, winding up in Iraq, outer space, and the Supreme Court. And a new *Stepford Wives* is in the theaters, played this time as comedy. Why remake it now?

The answer, I'm guessing, is that for a lot of us it was damn near comedy the first time around. The film was saddled with a Michael Crichton-like implausibility, its tone was ridiculously Gothic, and its vision of traditional womanhood outrageous.

The first of the Stepford wives we saw in '74 was floating across her manicured lawn in a diaphanous gown, a casserole — intended as a welcoming gift for her new neighbors — proffered forward in her lovely hands.

By contrast, Katharine Ross was cast in the lead role as a typically "modern" woman, but, as one critic pointed out, it was difficult to distinguish between that actress's robotized and vital, living states. If that was how empowered women behaved, what were the men up in arms about in the first place?

Among those who got the joke, apparently, was screenwriter Paul Rudnick. In his new treatment

of *The Stepford Wives*, Rudnick has turned the wives of Stepford into powerful women who have cowed their husbands, and who pay the ultimate price when the men rewire them into homemaker automatons.

Joanna Eberhart (Nicole Kidman) is just such a woman. She develops sleazy reality TV programs for a network until one day she is summarily fired; she and her husband leave New York for Stepford, and the battle of the sexes is re-begun.

As a gay man (and I base this assumption upon a filmography that includes *Jeffrey*, *In & Out*, and a screen treatment of the life of Jacqueline Susann), Rudnick writes *The Stepford Wives* from the position of an insider; that is, he asks the audience to accept his liberal good intentions while treating feminism as a sacred cow at which he takes good-natured jabs. And his technique is scattershot, so that gays, Republicans, and even Joanna's reality series are offered as targets too. He and director Frank Oz (who also helmed *In & Out*) take the approach that nothing's sacred and that the film is thus apolitical.

I'll be the killjoy that points out that, really, it *is* political, or rather that politics cannot be divorced entirely from this material. In 1974, no one wanted to watch horror in which attractive, smart women were robbed of their souls; who wants to watch it as comedy today?

The film hedges this outcome in its frantic, poorly judged wave of conclusions — the women are freed in a "just kidding" denouement — but then there's little in *The Stepford Wives* that isn't hedged: Joanna is seen to be a callous bitch in the opening scenes, as though she might deserve her fate, or at least learn a lesson from it; the American male is shown to be not-so-bad at the outcome; and the male partner of a stiff, Log Cabin Republican gets to have his cake (a Viggo Mortensen T-shirt) and eat it, too (he's elected to public office despite same).

The cast of *The Stepford Wives* is a wonder, but only Kidman (and then only in her opening scenes) and Christopher Walken, as Stepford's alpha male, come away with their dignity.

Glenn Close would seem a natural in the role of the matriarch of the Stepford robots, but she's far too broad — surely at the director's bidding — and you never sense any menace that might have given her role some meat.

Bette Midler plays Whoopi Goldberg playing Joanna's best friend. Roger Bart, as the ironic gay sidekick, is embarrassing.

And as Joanna's scheming husband, Matthew Broderick, that most friendly of screen personas, only just barely manages threat.

The Stepford Wives musters a few witty touches: Broderick's password for his home alarm system is "1956," and when he and Kidman first exit the highway for Stepford WRONG WAY signs crowd the road.

But much more of the comedy is flubbed than connects; even the reality TV parodies are flat, and these can't be very hard to lampoon. Worse, Oz and Rudnick manage to bungle the camp: the robotized women of Stepford are infantilized rather than feminized, portrayed not as submissive

but aphasic.

The film's anxious tone hectors more than amuses, and its denial of all social responsibility is asserted rather too loudly to be believed.

What finally sinks *The Stepford Wives* is that its writer and director lack the nerve to pull the camp from their material. John Waters could do it, but Rudnick and Oz, for all their pretense at cutting humor, are unwilling to offend. A real satire could maybe have sailed. But these two shoot wide; by wishing not to offend, they actually manage the job.



After 29 years, Adjani shines again

Originally published June 17, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



MERCY BUCKETS: French actress Isabelle Adjani hasn't had a good role since 1976, but she's marvelous in *Bon Voyage* — and doesn't look anywhere near 48 years old.

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aced with a good choice of movies in Dallas one night recently, I decided in favor of the new

French comedy *Bon Voyage* based on the presence of Isabelle Adjani in the cast. Like everyone else in the world, I first saw Adjani in François Truffaut's *The Story of Adèle H.* in 1976 (the actress was 19 years old at the time of filming); this film is still my favorite of Truffaut's, at least in part because of Adjani's marvelous, nuanced performance as the troubled daughter of Victor Hugo. I next saw her in Roman Polanski's wiggly *The Tenant* a year or two later; as a spaced-out Parisienne who takes up with the film's non-hero, she certainly held your attention. But was she great? No, and she continued not quite living up to her debut — turning in good, but not revelatory performances — for the next three decades. You would think I might've given up.

But learning from one's mistakes turns out to be for losers after all, and in *Bon Voyage* Adjani vindicates my dim-witted single-mindedness in spades.

Playing a self-obsessed actress named Viviane Denvers, Adjani has suddenly hit her stride; you can hope — and I do — that a great career is being born at last in this arresting actress, 29 years after her historic debut. (It doesn't hurt that Adjani, now 48, simply does not look her age; objectively, one might place her at 30-something based on her still very alluring appearance.)

Watching her, I thought of Jeanne Moreau and Simone Signoret, a pair of French beauties who turned in so many great performances in their middle-age and beyond. Adjani has demonstrated her gift; I look forward to one day ranking her with the above.

As Denvers, Adjani hits the right note again and again. The chief pleasure of this harmless (and often very enjoyable) farce is in watching Denvers wield her considerable beauty and charm — not to mention her training as an actress — when faced with such aggravations as disposing of a body, wooing a diplomat, or simply juggling the attentions of the men who adore her and whom she allows the pleasure of their adoration. "Rebooting" reads Denvers face in such situations, and Adjani allows us the joy of watching her character shift allegiances midway through a lobby, mid-sentence, mid-thought.

Bon Voyage itself is a winning minor farce, the sort of confection Ealing Studios (purveyors of such 1950s comedies as *The Lavender Hill Mob* and the original *The Ladykillers*) might have whipped up. It's not a film to place beside those two comic marvels, but it displays a similarly restrained humor and quick pace.

The film tells the story of a mixed group of Frenchmen who escape the pending German occupation of Paris during WWII by heading south to Bordeaux. There they are brought together at the Hotel Splendide, a fashionable hostel, but one that is quickly succumbing to the mayhem around it.

Among the refugees is Adjani's Denvers, her true love (to the extent that she's capable of focusing that emotion on another), her diplomat boyfriend-of-the-moment, a scientist whose cargo of heavy water must not land in the hands of the Nazis, his attractive young assistant, sundry high society types, and a strangely influential reporter whose spoken French is accented rather suspiciously.

Director Jean-Paul Rappeneau, best known to American audiences for 1995's *Horseman on the Roof*, brings lavish production and a sly style to *Bon Voyage* (*Horseman* was once the most expensive French production ever mounted), and the film's period look and mood is a good

backdrop for the coincidences, minor tragedies, and good luck that in the end save the day. And his cast is rounded out by a powerful amassing of French star power, including a trim, cleaned-up Gérard Depardieu. Peter Coyote is also present as the wily reporter. Pun intended.

But it's Isabelle Adjani that I went to see, and as the cards fall, she's the best reason to attend. Perseverance pays off in *Bon Voyage*, both mine and hers. As for *The Story of Adèle H.*, try Netflix.



Killer *Potter* has real magic

Originally published June 10, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



GROWING UP: *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* takes Harry and his series into a far more real, scary place where puberty is more than just a plot device, but a display of real emotions.

A

few Christmases ago, my little niece Maddie asked me, rather sweetly, if I wanted to watch the first Harry Potter movie with her on the little portable DVD player Santa had brought her.

"No, I don't," I told her.

"Why not?" she asked. I was supposed to have wanted to.

"Because it's a story of white male entitlement," I explained.

Maddie hit me, reflexively kind of — it was *not* a story of whitemail whatever I had said — and then got her other, alcoholic uncle to watch it with her instead.

Maybe I eventually felt guilty for spoiling Maddie's planned Christmas day activity, but then again, you can't begin learning to spot Hollywood's (and in this case J. K. Rowling's) insidious subtexts at too young an age.

My ideological objection to the first film, and later to the second one, was that little Harry lived a life of unearned privilege at Hogwarts: he was a genius wizard by birthright, his mastery of quidditch came to him spontaneously and without toil, and the fact of his parents' fame won him instant celebrity from peers and faculty alike.

Harry was far from a model student. Whenever reference was made to a rule that students at Hogwarts were never, ever to break, it was mentioned for the sole purpose of alerting the audience to the fact that Harry was going to break it. He did, and for this he was rewarded rather than punished; when he defied an instructor's order that the students not fly their brooms, for instance, another instructor spotted him airborne and arranged for him the unprecedented honor of playing on the quidditch team as a first-year student. Where one imagines that Oliver Twist would have been beaten nearly to death, Harry was given valuable gifts instead, including a state-of-the-art broomstick and a rare cloak that provided invisibility.

In fairness, there was the matter of a heroic deed Harry himself accomplished while still in diapers, like the infant on America's Funniest Home Videos who freakishly appeared to utter, "I love you." But as a viewer, I was never comfortable with the work-to-compensation ratio that Harry enjoyed.

Still, why "white male" entitlement? Well, Harry Potter isn't a little black girl, is he? If he had been, the unquestioned, general excellence bestowed upon him by Rowling and her adaptors would have been merely annoying. As written, it's part of an malevolent, history-long tradition instead.

Am I overreacting? Of course I am — just ask my niece. It's a measure of how sickened I am by the whole enterprise, white male entitlement, sold-out theaters, unending product tie-ins, vomit-flavored jelly beans and tepid, pedestrian "magic" included.

I understand that the *Harry Potter* films aren't going to ruin the world. Still, I'm a little bit bewildered and frightened to find myself reporting the opposite: that the third in the series, Alfonso Cuarón's *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, might add a little something to the year in film instead.

The fact is, it's a very good movie, and minus the surplus plot and attendant climaxes of the last 40 minutes, it might have been a wonderful one.

I credit Cuarón, whose steamy *Y tu mamá también* of 2001 was a genuine cinematic joyride, and

who, together with cinematographer Michael Seresin, brings to *Harry Potter* a unique sense of the magical.

One might imagine that Rowling will be disappointed in it, despite interviews to the contrary (she has clear motives for withholding any complaints); her novels are twee affairs, with precious place names, archly clever details, and Spielberg-ready characters and locales. Those who don't choke on the artifice of the occasion might enjoy reading them over a spot of hot tea.

In Cuarón's film, the real world encroaches on Rowling's to wonderful effect; his darker, looser vision provides a cinematic climate in which puberty is more than a plot device, where Hermione's temper tantrums are angry rather than darling, where Harry himself is shown to have a range of feelings beyond those that produce cunning, loyal, or noble deeds.

The difference might be summed up this way: while our threesome (Ron rounds out Harry's crew) have faced peril before, as when Hermione was menaced by a troll in the bathroom in a previous film, it's only in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* that the audience has had cause to experience something like fear.

Christopher Columbus, director of the first two *Harry Potter* movies, is a filmmaker with a 1980s aesthetic derived from John Hughes and Steven Spielberg, both of whom helped to advance his young career. The fantasy world he constructed for his *Harry Potter* films was the same tired whimsy that Hollywood routinely churns out — at enormous expense — whenever magic is mentioned in a screenplay; the films looked like new Las Vegas casino resorts.

Cuarón's look is far fresher, and the details provided conjure strangeness even when they're as innocent as an umbrella caught in a gale. The first hour and a half of *The Prisoner of Azkaban* is delightfully ominous and suffused with the real magic of smart filmmaking.

Even if the last act of *The Prisoner of Azkaban* kills a lot of earned goodwill, I think a case could be made for nominating Cuarón in the best director category. He largely overcomes the dilemma of an inherent cuteness in the material, and Daniel Radcliffe and Emma Watson, playing Harry and Hermione, give their best performances thus far.

As Ron, Rupert Grint has less material here than he has previously, but he's always been a wonderful performer with good intuitions and a real screen presence. Elsewhere, Alan Rickman shines as the mysterious Severus Snape while, as with the last two films, the considerable star power amassed in the faculty is wasted, having no roles.

If the film gets away from Cuarón finally, consider his dilemma: working from an original novel, part of a longer series and a major force in the public imagination, he wasn't exactly at liberty to trim Rowling's unwieldy plot. *The Prisoner of Azkaban* feels over once its villain is unmasked (as in the past films [or books] the audience has been seriously misled as to his identity), but a third of the action — all of it expendable in dramatic terms — remains.

Cuarón dutifully takes us through it, like a personable tour guide who sees his audience yawning with the west wing of the castle still to go. He's hasty in the film's concluding forty minutes; if Rowling fans feel cheated by this, those of us in the real world salute him.

In *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, Cuarón has made a film for a bigger audience than that of the first two, and aesthetically it blows its bloated, false predecessors out of the water. At one point in the film, reference is made to the title of Ray Bradbury's short fiction *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (perhaps the title predates even this story, but I don't know whence). The phrase sums up the film expertly: it's creepy and fun, and the action of the first part vibrates with real dread. I have a suggestion for the inevitable DVD special edition: include a version that ends where it should end — at its dramatic conclusion — as well as the theater product. That way Rowling's fans can have their movie, and the general public can get the masterful fantasy that might have been.

And what about little Harry's entitlement? The ideologue in me, finding that it was having a good time, didn't much care.



***Junky Day After* still entertaining**

Originally published June 3, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



FIGHTING ICE FOR LIFE: In what may be the only scene in the whole movie where someone has their mouth open and no clichés are coming out, Dennis Quaid's paleoclimatologist scrambles for his life.



ARE THREE F5s AN F15?: Oh, Hollywood. Only you would climb into a helicopter (the very tiny dot in the center) during a tornado. At least no one will have to take this guy's pilot's licence.

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hat could really happen," a friend of mine told me earnestly after seeing *The Day After Tomorrow*. Well, I guess, but then I guess that maybe somehow *The Blob* could really happen, too.

I don't mean that I doubt the probability of global warming; I'm not a pundit for the right, and thus have no reason to. I'm only stating what the filmmakers knew all along: that the phenomenon of global warming makes for a better disaster film if the action spans two weeks instead of two centuries.

You have to kind of admire writer/director Roland Emmerich for coming up with this one; global warming isn't the first idea that pops into your head when you're trying to think of a way to eliminate New York and Los Angeles on film.

But, ideally, admiring his idea and believing it are two different things. It's not *The Day After*, it's *The Day After Tomorrow*. If you're really willing to take it seriously, then I insist that you skip *Twister*.

Our premise here is that the melting of polar ice caps has, in reality, been moving along at a better clip than anyone could have guessed (my point being that, in *real* reality, people — specifically scientists — *could* have). For complicated reasons, this warming is resulting not in warmth but rather is hastening the coming of another ice age.

It's symptomatic of the film's problems that Emmerich feels the need to explain why this is; imagine that Alfred Hitchcock had junked up *The Birds* with bullshit science to show why his gulls beaked Tippi Hedren (atomic testing? UFOs? smog?) and you begin to see what I mean. In truth, the audience didn't care why then — they just wanted to see it happen — and we still don't care today.

Emmerich uses junk science when any little excuse would have done, but then there's a lot about *The Day after Tomorrow* that's junky.

It's crammed with people (but not characters), the structure is ungainly beyond description, and the dialogue is flatly embarrassing; any time an actor opens his mouth, clichés pour out.

Dennis Quaid, appearing in his first role as a paleoclimatologist, is asked at one point if he shouldn't delay for one day, due to weather, his mission to rescue his son Sam. "Sam may not have one more day," he replies, and I felt like I had walked in on him in the bathroom.

But characters, structure, and a screenplay are not what *The Day after Tomorrow* is offering. It would benefit from those things, but Emmerich's promise, as with his *Independence Day* and *Godzilla*, is that he's going to give you the spectacle of disaster, and in this he's made his most successful film to date.

For Kansans, the Los Angeles material may seem strained: the L.A. skyline is leveled by tornadoes while helicopters fly past and TV news reporters stand a block or two from F5s.

But the devastation of Manhattan by a giant tidal wave is tricked out in cool effects, and Emmerich is generous in his use of them; Midtown is shot, submerged several stories, from every possible angle, and the wave itself arrives in the streets far more predictably than the buses it throws before it. An image of the swollen sea swamping the Statue of Liberty is actually frightening, and the arrival on Fifth Avenue of an unmoored ship — it drifts in through the flooded streets from the harbor — is chimerical enough that I was sorry it had to serve a function in the similarly flooded plot.

Meanwhile, elsewhere, unexpected turbulence, packs of wolves, and super-cooled funnels of gasoline-freezing air menace a surfeit of people we may or may not ever see again.

Emmerich goes to the trouble of identifying one locale as the Chiyoda District of Tokyo; we stay only long enough for a businessman to be brought down by a freak hailstorm and never return.

Astronauts are introduced for the sole purpose of providing cosmic images of the planet in crisis — no one told the director that it's possible to insert these without explanation and certainly without attaching whole characters to them — and three major characters at a Scottish weather lab are written away when their generator fails in the cold.

A similar array of familiar faces passes by in the cast: Quaid, Ian Holm, Dash Mihok. Of them only Sela Ward, as a devoted doctor, and Jake Gyllenhaal provide any interest beyond their roles as potential victims.

The Day after Tomorrow is junk, but it's not a rip-off.

You could hope for more; you might wish, for instance, that the director had used real wolves instead of cheap-looking CGI, that fewer characters had bravely sacrificed themselves, that the politics of Mexican border policy were left completely out of the fray.

As a director, Emmerich is clumsy, and as a screenwriter he's always telling you what you see

when he should be showing you instead. (Needing his wolf pack, he actually scripts a scene at the Central Park Zoo in which we're shown the empty cage; two workers are on hand to say, "The wolves are gone" as well. How much creepier to have the wolves appear when needed — actually, they aren't needed — and let the characters speculate about how they got there?)

But Emmerich's intentions are good; he sincerely wants to entertain you, which is more than you can say for most of his Hollywood peers. And with the real heat of June upon us, there are worse ways to blow a couple of hours in the dark.



***Good Bye, Lenin!* a dead-on satire**

Originally published May 27, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



WORSE NEWS THAN F5: In *Good Bye, Lenin!*, a young man begins producing fake socialist newscasts to convince his mother that socialist East Germany still survives.

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he German comedy *Good Bye, Lenin!*, which picked up last year's best picture award from both

the German and European academies, and which was its country's selection for the American Oscars, is based on a simple, funny premise: Christiane, a good, active socialist woman — one of the last true believers in the twilight of East German socialism — goes into a coma in October of 1989; when she awakens nine months later, Honecker has resigned, the Berlin Wall has fallen, the borders partitioning Germany have vanished, and Coca-Cola, that symbol of capitalist hegemony, has opened a plant near her apartment in East Berlin. Her children (19-year-old Alex and his sister Ariane), charged with keeping their mother from experiencing shocks lest she suffer a heart attack, make it their job to keep the socialist past alive for her within the confines of their apartment.

It's a bigger job than it appears at first glance.

When his mother requests a certain brand of state-produced pickle, Alex wanders into a westernized supermarket that's a wonderland of brightly packaged goods made abroad; he resorts to dumpster-diving ("This is what they've driven us to," his elderly neighbor remarks upon seeing him sorting trash) in order to stockpile old jars and packages into which he can pour new products. When his mother spots a Coke sign from her window, Alex and his West German friend, an aspiring filmmaker, begin producing fake socialist newscasts to play on a hidden VCR; in the first they explain that scientists have proven that Coke is actually an East German invention ("I thought we had that before the war," his surprised mother remarks) and that the socialist dictatorship has thus rightly reclaimed ownership of the product.

It is, as I say, a good premise, but it runs its course well before the end of *Good Bye, Lenin!*.

What sustains the film is a secondary story about Alex's coming of age in a rapidly changing world.

As played (very nicely) by Daniel Bruehl, Alex is a conflicted young man who was raised on the belief that the Communist dream was an obtainable and worthy one, but who is alert to the shortcomings and inhumanities of the system and is lured by the freedoms and youth-oriented consumerism of the West.

In the film's opening scenes we see him joining in a protest for freedom of the press; but after the government collapses, he ruefully notes that his mother's physician has abandoned East Berlin for the West and asks her replacement when he plans to abandon them, too.

Alex's ambivalence is played out in the fake newscasts he and his friend produce.

When his mother leaves the apartment one day and sees the streets of East Berlin filled with Hondas and BMWs, Alex creates a newcast explaining that inflation and crime has caused thousands of westerners to seek asylum in East German embassies throughout Europe, and we see clips of hundreds of people flowing over the Berlin Wall, but reversed, so that it seems that they're escaping into socialism rather than from it.

East Germany has graciously welcomed these refugees, Alex's newcast explains; they're each being given two hundred marks as a welcoming gift, and Berliners everywhere are taking them into their homes and helping them to establish a life in the beneficent East.

As Alex's newscasts proceed what emerges is not an East Germany rife with political corruption and indifference, overseen by a malevolent Stasi, but Alex's dream of a kindly, humanist socialism that could've existed instead. It's an extraordinary and touching construction (and one that's too plainly stated in the film's iffy narration).

Visually, *Good Bye, Lenin!* is beautifully well made, and director Wolfgang Becker and his creative staff have an unerring eye for detail. Honecker-era Berlin is perfectly depicted, with a drab gold, yellow, and brown color scheme, cheaply functional furnishings, and ghastly, weirdly unfashionable clothes. ("Look at the crap we used to wear," Alex's sister says while pawing through her wardrobe of nine months before.) After the Wall comes down, capitalism plays its own tricks, so that the clothing becomes a tad garish, Alex's sister takes a job at Burger King, and a tanning bed finds its way into their apartment.

The problems with *Good Bye, Lenin!* are small ones: it's a little soft in parts, there's a subplot involving a cosmonaut that's unnecessary, and so on. But the film more than compensates with its bright good nature and intelligence. And one scene, an homage to Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*, stays with me: Christiane, escaping from her apartment, stands on the street as a helicopter flies by with an enormous statue of Lenin hanging suspended from it; as she watches, the statue turns and Lenin's outstretched arm appears to salute her. (In Fellini it was Jesus.) Goodbye, Lenin, and so much for his and Christiane's dream.



Ungainly *Troy* lacks realism

Originally published May 20, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



WE'D HOLD OUR HEAD, TOO: *Troy* manages to feature Brad Pitt as the nearly indestructible Achilles, but the film fails to explain *why* he's nearly immortal or why his heel is his weak spot. The film's weak spots include massive, unfortunate liberties with Homer's *Iliad*, garishness and a beauty who would not launch a thousand ships.



HAVEN'T THEY SEEN *THE HOLY GRAIL*?: Ten years, two weeks ... what's the difference? *Troy* accelerates its conquests so much that victory hardly seems that hard-won.

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he last time you spoke to me like this you were 10 years old and you'd just stolen Papa's horse. What have you done now?" Thus speaks Hector when his younger brother Paris is casting about for words to explain that he's taken the queen of Sparta from her husband the king, thus ensuring a war and the likely decimation of the brothers' state.

In theory, at least, *Troy* is based on a poem, the first summer blockbuster in history that can make such a claim. You'll be forgiven, though, if that bit of trivia occasionally slips your mind.

"May the gods keep the wolves in the hills and the women in our beds," offers another king by way of a toast at a celebration. Even the film's very first line has the flavor of yearbook verse at its most keenly self-conscious: "Men are haunted by the vastness of eternity."

With this David Benioff, who wrote the screenplay, announces his theme: that the lust for immortality is the engine driving his and director Wolfgang Petersen's extravagant recreation of

the siege and fall of Troy. The battle is thought to have actually taken place, probably between 1100 and 1350 B.C., but of course Homer's *Iliad* — with all of its gods, monsters, and myth — is the source material here, and Benioff, adapting it, takes liberties considerable enough that a Homer scholar couldn't guess how it ends.

A child, on the other hand, probably could.

The truth is that Peter Jackson treated Tolkein more respectfully in adaptation.

I mind. These are stories central to our civilization, and it makes a difference how, say, Agamemnon dies.

But after watching Robert Redford rape Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* way back in 1984, I can't quite work myself up to outrage. In this *Troy*, an uneasy confederation of Greek city-states is lead by the warlord king Agamemnon against the city of Troy after Paris, the city's prince, makes off with his brother's wife, Helen.

Into this mix comes Achilles, the handsome and unconquerable Greek warrior who commands his own band of fierce soldiers and who chaffs at Agamemnon's authority.

Also present, for those keeping score, are Hector, Priam, Patroclus, Odysseus, Briseis, and so on; missing are Cassandra, one Ajax (there were two), and many more.

In Homer the fall of Troy took over a decade; in Benioff it goes in about two weeks, or three hours of screen time. Director Petersen manages to avoid the worst-case scenario — a finished product that feels like a single, long battle — and he's staged his warfare lovingly, with startling aerial shots of amassed troops (maybe too many, since it only startles once), some inventive tactical tricks, and fairly clear action on the battlefield. His hand-to-hand combat, especially in a scene in which Achilles and Hector square off, is exciting. And a sequence in which the Temple of Apollo is sacked is staged with a surreal aloofness that connects.

But working against *Troy* is an essential junkiness; it made me yearn for *Spartacus* or a later Kurosawa epic such as *Ran*.

Petersen, whose previous works include *Das Boot* and *The Neverending Story*, is not the man you turn to for elegance or lightness of touch, and in *Troy* his handling of narrative is lumbering, obvious, ungainly. His camera work is overemphatic; it competes in action scenes and distracts in quiet ones. Aesthetically, a tackiness prevails, from the sets — the interiors in particular feel less Middle East and more Trump's Taj Mahal — to James Horner's quasi-Asian score, and even to the hairdos. When Orlando Bloom, as Paris, stands nude over Helen, his oiled, gym-built torso and carefully disarranged curls provided my friend and me with our one laugh.

Which brings us to the performances.

There's a central inauthenticity to *Troy* that's visible in every frame, but even if the screen were blank, the actors would provide it.

I'm not sure it's their fault.

Brad Pitt, as everyone knows, plays Achilles. He's buff here, and with his leather outfits and his hair pulled back off his forehead and tied, he brings to mind an '80s rock star, someone who might have played bass for Europe or Ratt. (Or Toshiro Mifune? Pitt's squatting, grunting Achilles may be a stab at Mifune's Yojimbo, or any of the other rogue samurai he played for Kurosawa.) I like Pitt, but no matter how much you pay him or how super-serious he acts, his diction and presence will never convey antiquity. They convey Towne East, and it's not his fault.

Orlando Bloom comes closer to inhabiting the era, but his schtick — his moist sensitivity — is more disingenuous.

I think that Brian Cox is likely to be nominated for his performance as Agamemnon; he shouts for all three hours, and although it's all false, it's the kind of factitious show of force that Hollywood admires.

Brendan Gleeson, playing his brother Menelaus, is the one brilliant bit of casting; there's a real physical resemblance between these men, and although Gleeson's modulated, believable fury doesn't redeem Cox's performance, it does suggest the possibility of a family trait.

An etiolated Peter O'Toole plays Priam at precisely one level deeper than any of his fellow cast members, save Gleeson, touch.

The Hollywood tradition is that the dialogue in historical epics is delivered in a kind of High American accent that borders on British. Eric Bana, in a decent performance as Hector, goes to the trouble of disguising his natural Australian accent to arrive at something near that.

More puzzling was Diane Kruger. Her performance as Helen of Troy — perhaps the most famed beauty in all of literature — never shows anything like the kind of sensuality that would cause a prince to forfeit his kingdom, even given Bloom's kissy-poo sensitivity. Helen's face, it is said, launched a thousand ships; certainly Kruger is attractive, but hers is a current, typical beauty, one that lacks a classic element or, on the other hand, fire.

The gods are left out of *Troy*; even Achilles mixed divine pedigree is only just touched on and left to lie. (Also missing is the explanation of why his heel is only the spot in which he is vulnerable to attack.) Divine immortality is of less interest to Benioff than the type of immortality that results from heroism and glory in battle, and this theme seems a sensible one for a legend kept alive for three thousand years. Thus is Homer immortalized, although I personally prefer the book to the movie. My bet is that his reputation outlasts *Troy*.



Rapid, vapid *Van Helsing* plotless

Originally published May 13, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



WHAT THE HELL'S GOING ON HERE: We don't know. There's not enough plot to help us figure it out. But we know that Van Helsing is more than 300 years old but apparently (see the reflection?) not a vampire.



PORN-WORTHY VAMPS: By "porn-worthy" we mean their acting skills. As for other attributes, well ... you'll have to talk to their agents. Or by the latest issue of *Maxim*. Really. And in print, you can't hear their horrible accents.



In her 1966 review of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Pauline Kael lamented that American movies had gotten "out of control." Mother of God. What if she had lived to see *Freddy vs. Jason*, *Kill Bill*, *The Passion of the Christ*, and now *Van Helsing*?

Clocking in at a mind-boggling 142 minutes — a little over an hour less than *Gone with the Wind*, whose action spanned the American Civil War — this incomprehensible story about a vampire hunter who kills Dracula is proof positive that Hollywood producers are not doing, or no longer understand, their jobs.

Louis B. Mayer would have shut this mother down at 80 minutes flat, and he would have been right to do it. But writer/director Stephen Sommers had no governor. His *Van Helsing* is insane.

I use "incomprehensible" judiciously above; the primary plot of *Van Helsing* blew right past me in a breezy exchange of dialogue that lasted perhaps 45 seconds, slapped onto the non-stop, computer-generated action as modestly as a label warning against use with alcohol. I struggled with it for awhile — it has to do with a secret Vatican order that has an interest in dispatching Dracula in order that several generations of a family might be released from limbo into heaven — but then gave in to what amounts to an essential narrative anarchy.

Van Helsing follows a simple, unique structure in which berserk, mind-numbing action is followed by brief exposition, followed again by more action. I've seen experimental Man Ray films with more clearly defined motives and better plot integrity.

Further working against me was a range of ridiculous accents employed by the cast that renders, at a conservative estimate, 15 percent of the dialogue virtually unintelligible. It's like the Tower of Babel, except that one imagines that God at His most wrathful used fewer and quieter sound effects.

An actress named Elena Anaya, playing a winged bride of Dracula with a Stevie Nicks-like pallor, delivers her lines in a faux Romanian accent that I may never forget. Her performance was so bad that it made me angry; to draw a comparison, you'd have to reach to porn.

Van Helsing is full of surprises in many senses of the phrase. The film opens with a sequence parodying James Whale's 1931 *Frankenstein* in which the doctor, at the moment of his triumph, is done in by Dracula; thus are Bram Stoker and Mary Shelley rewritten. Next we visit Notre Dame de Paris where Van Helsing encounters a Hulk-like monster who turns out to be not Quasimodo but Mr. Hyde. Both sequences remain unexplained, as does a key plot point in which it is revealed that the seemingly human Van Helsing was alive 300 years before.

The only reason I saw the conclusion of this film is that my companion wished to know why he had been, and our bafflement at not being told cannot find expression in words.

There are werewolves, too, and these, it turns out, are the only beings that can slay the Count. (He keeps a serum in his castle that reverses lycanthropy; when Van Helsing asks his love

interest why Dracula would keep such a serum on hand, she answers, "I don't care.")

The presence of vampires and werewolves in the same movie brings last year's *Underworld* to mind. Kate Beckinsale foolishly stars in both, and I commend her to Hot Topic as a potential "spokesmodel" should such a position be available.

Hugh Jackman plays Van Helsing without much hope; what I mostly noticed was that he wore the same clothing throughout the film before stripping down to a loincloth like Tarzan at the very end.

I enjoyed parts of *Van Helsing*, especially those scenes that take place in the village at the foot of Frankenstein's castle, where a prevalent black humor keeps things moving. They recalled to me Roman Polanski's vampire spoof *The Fearless Vampire Killers* to the extent that I wasn't sure if I was enjoying these scenes for themselves or out of nostalgia for the other film. And the film's climax, when you at last arrive, is so far unscrewed that for a few minutes you get caught up in the brash stupidity and senselessness of it.

But the operative word here is "stupidity." Van Helsing lost his memory "as penance for past sins" and he kills vampires for purposes of "self-realization."

One scene hinges on the fact that werewolves "only shed before the first full moon," and much of the later action depends on the heretofore unexplored notion that vampires, being dead, have only dead offspring. (These are reanimated by the Frankenstein monster somehow — Igor is there to help — but they pop like water balloons during a test flight.)

Movies have plots for a reason. They're more pleasurable that way, and their climaxes bring them to a satisfying end. *Van Helsing* is all climax; its frames are among the busiest I've ever seen, like an *Oliver!* that's all songs and dancing urchins, and the unrelenting action (set to a pompous, loud Alan Silvestri score) seems actively confrontational long before the end. There's no pacing, artistry, or moderation here.

Van Helsing may be the final capitulation to the ADD attention span of those of us raised in the era of Sesame Street or after; it explodes every few minutes to keep your attention. But even then a second, deeper mystery remains: Why did it have to be so fucking *long*?



***Godsend* unnecessarily complicated**

Originally published May 6, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



DR. EVIL: Things go wrong when a mad genius (Rober De Niro) convinces a family to clone another movie ... no, wait, a little boy.

B

esides the fact that it reminded me of the gloomy and stupid 1977 film *Demon Seed*, I don't have much to say about the new thriller *Godsend*.

Demon Seed was about a computer (computers in '77 representing the scary "other") that rapes the wife of its creator via the household appliances it controls. Somehow Julie Christie was made to star in this ridiculous movie, which I remember as being set-bound amid murky interiors.

Godsend is a lot better, but it shares the murk.

And while there is no comparison to be made between Christie and Rebecca Romijn-Stamos, who stars here, and whose line delivery is declamation rather than acting, there's a weird moment where the latter actress, clutching her son to her chest, resembles the previous for a second or two.

The son, in *Godsend*, is the problem. His parents (Romijn-Stamos and Greg Kinnear) lose him to an accident the day after his eighth birthday, but before he's cold in the ground, a mad genius (Robert De Niro) approaches them with the unethical proposition that their son's DNA might be used to create a second child identical to the first. Romijn-Stamos gives birth to the boy a second time, in effect, and he's given the same name (Adam) and grows up just like his first version did. When his eighth birthday rolls around, however, things get spooky: night terrors and strange visions scare Adam, and a new detachment in him scares his parents as well.

Scary kids are among the most frightening devices that horror movies have to offer, as in 1960's terrifying *Village of the Damned*, for instance. *Godsend*'s creepiest moment comes when, on the night of his birthday, Adam menacingly informs his father, "I don't think I like you so much anymore."

It's a credit to director Nick Hamm that he achieves this and most of the other legitimate scares in *Godsend* without the use of special effects or open wounds. And as Adam, little Cameron Bright has the inscrutable demeanor and pixie-like looks to suggest the possibility of hidden alliances with the unknown.

But in the end, a good premise and an unnerving child are wasted by unwelcome complications involving a second dead boy, a murder, and a fire at a school. Screenwriter Mark Bombback shoehorns this material in in order to provide the film with a twist ending, just like those that every thriller since *The Sixth Sense* has had to endure. And like most of them, *Godsend*'s bulky plot only confuses the viewers and weakens the narrative and hence the scares.

In 1977, *Demon Seed* stood out as a loser; today, *Godsend* doesn't look so bad compared with *The Butterfly Effect* and *Final Destination*. I offer that comment for perspective. True, *Godsend* is a better film than *Demon Seed*. But neither is something we should be asked to settle for.



Flacid *Connie and Carla* misses the bus

Originally published April 29, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)

C

Connie and Carla is a comedy with the bare, populist feel of Adam Sandler's films, or the Italian comedies of Roberto Benigni. Ditto *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and, with Nia Vardalos (star of same) writing and appearing as Connie, it's hard to watch the new movie without being reminded of the other. What these films have in common is an almost-retro feel that's conjured by the stress-free worlds in which they play out and a toothless humor that ducks issues or controversy. They're innocuous, as harmless as toothpaste commercials, and they almost always rake in the cash.

If *Connie and Carla* fails to, and I think it will, it's because its title characters are a tad more brittle than warm.

An unacknowledged riff on *Some Like It Hot*, *Connie and Carla* tells the story of two daffy best friends who perform show tunes for handfuls of sleeping travelers in a VIP lounge at Chicago's O'Hare Airport. They believe in themselves and in their love of dinner theater despite evidence that no one else does; when they witness a mob hit, they flee to West Hollywood, where

circumstances land them a spot as performers at a drag club. Masquerading as drag queens — that is as men pretending to be women, as in *Victor/Victoria* — they find in the club's gay clientele an audience that appreciates their talents, as well as the works of Rodgers and Hammerstein, at last.

There's some fun to be had here, but not quite enough, and the film is burdened by its tired message that drag queens are human beings too, just as they were in *To Wong Foo*. (I don't use *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* as a comparison because that really very funny film acknowledged what neither *Connie and Carla* nor *To Wong Foo* does: that in a group of four drag queens, one or more will likely be drunk at any given time.)

My favorite scene was one in which the girls do a medley that includes earnest excerpts from *Oklahoma!*, *Tommy*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and *Cats*. In another, six drag queens, all dressed as Liza Minnelli, do a spirited version of "Cabaret": it's not unlike an attack of *The Matrix*'s Agents Smith.

Theoretically, not all drag queens are homosexuals; Woody Allen taught us that in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex* in 1972, and then there's Eddie Izzard as well.

But *Connie and Carla* comes damn close to avoiding the issue of sexual orientation altogether. In this film, two drag queens are "roommates," two men kiss once onscreen (as a punch line), and warm affection is the strongest emotion on view. *Connie and Carla* shows that drag queens aren't only harmless, they're sexless as well.

It's inclusive at least, I guess, the way that Sandler's movies generally are, but I'm not sure how flattered gay men should feel. On the topic of homophobia, the film is slightly behind the curve; while even television is offering gays unquestioningly, *Connie and Carla* approaches the issue as though there were some scandal in it still. The battle it bravely fights may surprise those who feel that we've nearly won the war.

As Connie, Nia Vardalos generates almost too much good humor (and in drag she sometimes physically resembles a less butch Cher).

Carla is played by Toni Collette; with her horsey, open-mouthed looks of disbelief, it's fun to watch her playing comedy again — you almost expect her to bray — but she's far more broad here than in, say, *Muriel's Wedding*, and it eventually wears you out.

The plot hinges on the premise that these two women must portray men even to their friends among the drag queens they meet; acting gruff, the two come off as rude, and it undermines their appeal. We need, in *Connie and Carla*, to feel allied to these women, to admire their pluck and see through their dumb act to a deeper emotional intelligence and good sense; I was willing to take that bait even in *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion*. But in *Connie and Carla*, you feel there's not much more there. And the worst part is that they're better performers in drag.



***Barbarian Invasions* humorous,**

compassionate

Originally published April 22, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



CHANGING OF THE GUARD: *Barbarian Invasions* hinges on the dramatic handing down of life from one generation to the next.

L

ast year's Canadian hit *The Barbarian Invasions*, which opened in Wichita last week, deals with the illness and death of a middle-aged man and about the ways in which he and his family and friends reconcile themselves with him in the end. Yet the most poignant observation that the film makes — and the one that makes it so much an original take on its material — is the one eluded to in its title: that each generation is replaced by the next, that our values are often replaced rather than shared by them, that these barbarians, being our own sons and daughters, are already well within the gates.

The Barbarian Invasions opens with an impressive tracking shot (and a very funny one — the film has a keen, dry sense of humor) through the corridors of a rundown Canadian hospital, eventually arriving at our protagonist, a 50-something cancer patient named Remy (Remy Girard). Remy's condition, we're given to understand, is not good, and in the opening scenes he receives visits from his estranged wife Louise (Dorothee Berryman), a hysterical former

mistress, and his son Sebastien (Stephane Rousseau).

Writer/director Denys Arcand sketches Remy's values quickly: he's a leftist, formerly a radical, who came of age at a time when Godard was trumpeting the virtues of Maoism and free love was taken as an article of faith.

His son is another matter: a self-made millionaire, Sebastien is seldom without his cell phone, and it is with this appliance that he amasses his wealth. Articles of faith, for Sebastien, are negotiable. He wants his father to relocate to a state-of-the-art hospital in Baltimore where he will be cared for in the kind of luxury that the Canadian public health system does not afford.

Remy will not budge; he voted, he says, for public health, and he will now live and die with it. And anyway he wants to be in Canada, among his family and friends.

The trouble is that his family and friends are not around.

Besides Sebastien (who lives in London with his wife), Remy and Louise have a daughter who spends her life at sea, currently aboard a ship in the Pacific. His friends, the old group of like-minded radicals from Remy's young adulthood, have long since dispersed.

Sebastien wishes to install his father in the Baltimore hospital as a way of assuaging his guilt for his absence; lacking that, and following an impassioned chiding from his mother, he makes it his goal to find a better place for his father within the public hospital and to reassemble his old group of friends.

The first hour of *The Barbarian Invasion* chronicles this mission, and it's a glorious hour.

Later the action of the film moves to a lakeside cabin in which Remy, in the company of his friends, awaits his death, and director Arcand, in choosing to confront this material directly, makes decisions that cannot help but result in what reads onscreen as sentimentality.

But in the film's first half, his sure, light touch is a revelation.

Sebastien is shown going about his task in the manner to which he is most accustomed: he buys the cooperation of the bureaucracy and the union. It's not very egalitarian — his father would be appalled — but it works, and it's this same father who reaps the benefits. This first hour is often very funny, but it makes its subtle points, too, and we gradually become aware that Sebastien is more than a billfold. Arcand shows us how he made his fortune, but he shows us that his father's plight has awakened a feeling human, too.

In fact, *The Barbarian Invasions* exhibits a wonderful compassion for all those inflicted with the condition of being human.

Arcand very deftly paints the moral landscape of the older generation, and the subtle warfare being waged against it by a younger one still struggling to find its moral footing, and he does so with an even-handedness that amounts to an act of grace.

Remy and his friends, lakeside, pass a joint around and brag about blowjobs given and received since the ideological heyday of the '60s with a slightly self-congratulatory openness; the son, on

the other hand, finding himself in need of heroin for treating his father's pain, begins his quest by consulting the police.

Arcand doesn't court our ridicule of these characters in either case; rather, he makes us aware that they see these foibles themselves, and the realization deepens the characters and enriches their interactions. As a director Arcand has the rare gift of not assuming that he knows more than his characters might, that he is somehow wiser than those he portrays.

In *The Barbarian Invasions* a young woman begins a course of treatment for her own heroin addiction. She is attractive and compassionate, she doesn't overdose and die as a plot convenience, and she is shown to understand her own problem more deeply than those who try to address her about it within the film.

It may sound obvious to say that a junkie is likely to have given more thought to the issue of addiction than those who are not. But when did you last see a user portrayed as more than his problem, as both empathetic and self-aware, on the screen?

Parts of *The Barbarian Invasions* are a little obvious, such as a scene in which a Catholic priest explains that in 1966 people just stop attending mass. And the film runs aground for a brief stretch in its second half. Still, it's a work of rare intelligence, with a true humanist sensibility, and its characters live full lives onscreen.

Arcand finds a way to reconcile the two generations he depicts without selling out his material or his characters. His honesty is both chilling and somehow redemptive, as in a scene wherein a very sick Remy reflects on the topic of barbarians and, seeing his son approach, says, "Behold their prince."

Too often lately reviews of new releases have read, "adults can enjoy it, too." In the case of *The Barbarian Invasions*, grown-ups everywhere should be thrilled that someone somewhere has made a movie just for them. Have a look.



***Cozy Home on the Range* a refreshing Disney effort**

Originally published April 22, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



GOT RENT?: Three cows go on a quest to save the farm from foreclosure — by rustling a cattle rustler.

I

t seems to me that the new Disney film *Home on the Range* is one of that studio's better animated efforts in many years. Some basic liabilities have been addressed: by coöpting the plot of the film from melodrama, the filmmakers acknowledge the formulaic shortcomings of the genre; the humans here are rendered as caricature rather than "realistically"; there's little painful mawkishness; and the life lesson urged on us takes a backseat to the laughs. There are fewer songs, too, and those that remain play no role in the action; not that the songs were less than a lot of fun in a film like *Beauty and the Beast*, but I think we've all heard "A Whole New World" (from *Aladdin*) enough to know the coma-inducing obverse.

The plot follows a show cow named Maggie (voiced by Roseanne Barr) who is relocated to a small farm named a Patch of Heaven when her owners are forced to sell their own land. There she meets the rest of the barnyard, notably a pair of bovines named Mrs. Calloway (Dame Judi Dench) and Grace (Jennifer Tilly, whose voice is just right for animation). When foreclosure papers are served on a Patch of Heaven, the three cows head out to capture the notorious cattle rustler Alameda Slim (Randy Quaid), whose bounty happens to be the exact amount due on the mortgage at the farm.

Home on the Range tells this story in a cartoon style somewhere just this side of Chuck Jones, a fact that automatically serves to undercut any gravity accrued when Maggie and Mrs. Calloway learn to respect one another's differences. I couldn't bring myself to see *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*; with a title like that, who could? Being taught the value of preserving minority cultures by the corporation that functions as chief purveyor of homogenized fantasy chaffs. But *Home on the Range* doesn't play the respect game. It's a relief to hear Jeb, a goat, complain,

"Now we'll be eaten" when he learns of the farm's financial shortfall; I'd rather eat the goat than watch Spirit run free.

Home on the Range is a reminder that the Disney crew can be pretty funny when it needs to be (not to mention legitimately thrilling, as in a runaway mine car sequence that actually startled me). Think of it in the *101 Dalmatians* range: funny, a lot of fun, and not requiring a spoonful of sugar to go down.



Hellboy, Scooby-Doo 2 nearly the same flick

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by [Jake Euker](#)



RUT-ROH, RAGGY: *Hellboy* is more forgettable than the more modest *Scooby-Doo 2*.



In my last review of *Scooby-Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed*, for our April Fools' Day issue, I identified Ryan Phillippe, Stanley Kubrick, Ingmar Bergman, and a man named Taffy as the

film's directors. I've seen it now and, although I still don't know who directed it, it's not so bad. There's a little magic peppered throughout; it's something the kids might enjoy.

Among the things that recommend *Scooby-Doo 2* is its reasonable, 90-minute length. Guillermo del Toro, director of the new comic book adaptation *Hellboy*, could learn a thing or two about brevity from the other guy. Parts of *Hellboy* are enjoyable enough, I guess, but there's way, way too much to potentially enjoy. In the end — and the end is 2 hours and 15 minutes coming — I remembered *Hellboy* less for its pleasurable moments and more as an ordeal.

Not to say that I remember it very well. *Scooby-Doo* and *Hellboy* share a couple of incidental plot points (both films, for instance, feature a supernatural battle in a museum) and having seen them more or less back to back, I have some trouble separating them. *Scooby-Doo* comes out on top; it's guileless, designed almost to be forgotten, and its modest intentions generate less resentment when its set pieces tank. What remains of *Hellboy*'s museum battle is that the monster too closely resembles that of *Predator*.

Hellboy, based on Mike Mignola's comic books, tells the story of the title creature, a demon-like entity who is brought to Earth in 1944 when a group of occultists in the employ of Hitler attempt to open a portal between this world and another, thus bringing the gods of chaos into the war on Germany's side. Their plans are foiled by the Allies, into whose care the infant *Hellboy* is brought; he is subsequently raised at the Bureau for Paranormal Research in Newark (the building recalls both Lenin's tomb and Vienna's Secession) which he leaves only to battle his other-worldly peers when the world is threatened.

So it's *Ghostbusters* basically, except that the hero is bright red and sports stubs where his horns try to grow. These horns *don't* grow because *Hellboy* (Ron Perlman, who is saddled with a not-very-likable hero), in an attempt to fit in with humankind, files them off; he's a loner and a prisoner, but he yearns in his heart to fit in and, especially, to win the affections of Liz Sherman (Selma Blair), a fellow resident of the Bureau who has the ability to cause firestorms.

Comic books tend to be well-populated, and so it is that *Hellboy* deals also with a young man named John (Rupert Evans) who is brought in in the present day to help manage *Hellboy*'s temper, *Hellboy*'s father figure Broom (John Hurt), Rasputin, who is played by Ladislav Beran, his immortal Nazi girlfriend (Bridget Hodson), and many others.

Only one passage stands out in memory: *Hellboy*, in the company of human agents and a kind of a merman named Abe (Doug Jones / voiced by David Hyde Pierce), goes to investigate a subway where monsters are loose, and del Toro gives us a good look at how their mission goes disastrously wrong.

But elsewhere there's not much to write to your long-term memory files. Movies have lately given us a lot of monsters wreaking havoc in a lot of different cities, but looking back on all of it — on *The Time Machine*, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, *Godzilla*, and so on — all you get is a blur; it makes the sunlit, plainly observed violence of last year's ridiculous *Hulk* shine like precious metals by comparison. Given the glut and subsequent familiarity of this material, which is the better approach: to go to your task earnestly and with high expectations, as in *Hellboy*, or to blow the whole thing off as a jokey one-off, as in *Scooby-Doo 2*? I won't exactly

remember any of *Scooby-Doo 2*, but I'll forget all of *Hellboy* much sooner.



Gory *Dawn* lacks original's charm

Originally published March 25, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



THE CASE FOR CREMATION: *Dawn of the Dead* is heavy on the gross imagery but is self-aware enough to make jokes at its own expense. Still, it's a franchise that should just stay dead.

L

ike George Romero's 1978 original, *Dawn of the Dead* tells the story of a small group of humans who endeavor to prevent a much larger group of zombies from infiltrating a mall where they've taken refuge. *Zombies* are trying to get into a *mall*; the hilarity is built into the premise. It's a lost cause. In Romero's outing, the undertakings were pretty serious stuff, and whether or not he was in on the joke of his own premise was a tough call. In the remake, directed by newcomer Zack Snyder, Muzak sprinkles the proceedings with "You Light Up My Life" and Air Supply's "All Out of Love," and a security guard says that he doesn't want anyone "sneaking around and stealing shit" even as the parking lot outside fills with legions of the undead.

It's still not quite funny, though, and the reason is that there's a deeper joke here about a franchise

that, like those same zombies, just won't quite stay dead. 1968's *Night of the Living Dead* started it; the film was an exploitation piece, made on the cheap for a drive-in demographic, that rose above its lot. It had staying power because its vision was grubby and everyday, its premise — the dead rise from their graves and eat the living, period — was, in formal terms, sheer elegance, and its execution was gloriously single-minded. A pair of sequels, innumerable rip-offs, and a remake of the original followed, but none of these could match the pedestrian horror of the original. Hollywood became involved, too, with the curious result that what had begun as an exploitation film — a film that existed solely to provide more graphic content than mainstream cinema deemed appropriate — was co-opted into the machinery whose prudery had first birthed it. The result was a discernible rise in production values and a corresponding decline in real scares.

Dawn of the Dead provides some real scares, and in its opening sequences it even gets some real dread stirring. The film opens in a hospital where our eventual heroine (Ana, played by Sarah Polley) works as a nurse; she reports to a doctor that a patient suffering only from a bite is worsening and needs his attention, but the patient is not then where they expect him to be. Leaving her long shift with the mystery unsolved, she tunes past a news bulletin on the radio without hearing it; she and her husband call it an early night, and by morning all hell has broken loose.

The "hell" in *Dawn of the Dead* is explicit injury and decay. Like last year's *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, this film moves very quickly from providing what's fun about horror films — suspense and the thrill of the unexpected — to the merely gruesome. In our very first zombie attack, a little girl is pictured with a part of her face eaten away; it's a sophisticated effect in production terms (and one that Romero thankfully didn't have access to in his first *Dead* picture — he would have used it), but it doesn't scare so much as repulse. This effect, like the virus that apparently reanimates the film's dead, spreads very quickly throughout the proceedings; before long, heads are being blown open with some regularity, "twitchers" are dwelt on in detail, wounds requiring stitches are repaired onscreen.

Dawn of the Dead is not so bad a film as the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* remake — it has inventive moments, it expands its caged population to include a neighbor who deals guns and who is stuck on his roof, and it indulges the audience's fantasy of what it would be like to live on what's provided in a shopping mall — but what fills the screen isn't horror so much as war. In this, *Dawn of the Dead* and its ilk are perhaps closer to *Rambo* and its witless knock-offs than to a classic of the horror genre such as, say, *The Shining*.

In the scramble for box office returns, Hollywood has now become the major purveyor of what would once have been deemed exploitation films (I can't think of another genre that can accommodate *The Real Cancun* or *House of the Dead*, and I don't want to get started on *The Exorcist*). Exploitation films are still being made, notably in the form of pay cable softcore, but what could pass for real exploitation now in a theater? Snuff films? There is very little that major studios are not now willing to offer paying audiences.

Dawn of the Dead will find a paying audience, but it will a far smaller one, over the years, than the creepier, more suggestive, and less graphic *Night of the Living Dead*. Those who go to the film and are enthusiastic about it are that same drive-in audience that Romero was courting back in 1968, except that it's Hollywood courting them now. They're seeking sensation, not the thrill

that a true horror film provides. And who knows? Maybe if Universal offered them a snuff film, they'd attend.

A final piece of built-in hilarity: *Dawn of the Dead* is the film that finally kicked *The Passion of the Christ* from the top slot at the box office this week. The two films are more alike than I like to think, and all the other attendant jokes are too obvious to touch on.



The Company is a misstep, but not a fall

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by [Jake Euker](#)



ALL ABOUT THE DANCE: Robert Altman's *The Company* is all about producing ballet — plot and narrative come second. Still, it has some beautiful scenes.

W

e haven't had a ballet film in a while; could it really have been 1977's *The Turning Point* that came most recently? (I refuse to count 85's *White Nights*, which had more to do with obstructing dance than promoting it.) In his new film *The Company*, Robert Altman drops in on the form as if

to check up on it; his prognosis is that all is pretty well.

The prognosis is the problem, too: in *The Company* Altman provides a lot of interesting dance (the film documents a season with the Joffrey Ballet of Chicago, the "company" of the title), but there's little else to sustain us. Screenwriter Barbara Turner hasn't provided a conflict.

Instead, the film is a portrait of a dancer (Neve Campbell, who also is credited with the story and who co-produced); as the film opens, she's leaving her current boyfriend, also a dancer (Davis Robertson), and before long is involved with a handsome chef (James Franco, who is looking more like a young James Dean with each film).

During the course of the film her career develops nicely, we check in with her estranged parents and their current spouses, and we briefly visit fellow dancers as they, in vignettes, sustain injuries, practice, scramble to get by in the real world beyond the studio. And a generous amount of screen time is given to Malcolm McDowell, who plays — wonderfully — the company's artistic director.

Techniques familiar to Altman's admirers (among whose numbers I am to be counted) are in evidence, but they're restrained here as if in deference to the more serious business of dance. Watching *The Company* we're aware of improvisational passages, we visit multiple conversations simultaneously, and we pan across the faces at a party, but these stylistic touches are offered in hushed tones, at no time approaching the brashness of similar sequences in Altman's *Nashville* or *Gosford Park*. What Altman focuses on instead is the work at hand — producing ballet — and he gives us the result in long, clear scenes that serve as the movie's focus.

At the center of the action is Campbell (she, Franco, and McDowell, are the only professional actors present), and she acquits herself very nicely in the dance sequences (Campbell studied dance before becoming an actress).

Seeing her producer's credit, it's tempting to think of *The Company* as a vanity project, but in fact there's much more going on, too much for the charge to stick. Her performance, like Franco's, is nice, and given the lack of narrative you have plenty of time to ponder it.

The Company is not a waste — far from it. The lack of a real narrative drags, but there's plenty of lovely material all the same, and several of the dance pieces (particularly a pas-de-deux performed in a rainstorm to "My Funny Valentine") are enraptured. My guess is that Altman set out to make a movie as delicately evocative as that pas-de-deux and that he abandoned a narrative so as to somehow simplify and reduce; my feeling is that *The Company* is meant to be enjoyed as we would enjoy just such a piece. It's a miscalculation, but not a grave offense.



Secret Window is really just Window

Originally published March 18, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



HOW YA LIKE ME NOW, PRETTY BOY?: An extra-spooky John Turturro stalks Johnny Depp in the not-so-suspenseful suspense thriller *Secret Window*, based on yet another Stephen King story.

J

ohn Turturro, playing a Mississippi-born psychopath named Johnny Shooter in the new film *Secret Window*, creates one of the great horror villains in recent film.

With his beady eyes and prominent nose, his hair slicked down beneath a parson's hat, he brings to mind one of Flannery O'Connor's fire-and-brimstone lunatics or Robert Mitchum's murderous preacher in *Night of the Hunter*. He bites off his words with a quick, forceful Southern drawl, and the rage and intensity beneath his speech tells you that you probably need to do as he says. "Whose screwdriver do you think that is in that man's head?" he asks at one point, and the authority he gives the line is both funny and winningly scary.

He's physically intimidating, too; I kept remembering the almost-scrawny, boxers-clad Turturro of *Box of Moonlight* and wondering how he managed, in *Secret Window*, the trick of looming. I don't believe I've enjoyed a horror villain this much since Piper Laurie burned up the screen in *Carrie*.

Ultimately, *Secret Window* doesn't do Turturro justice (nor star Johnny Depp, as we'll see later), but it does manage to generate some suspense before dwindling into the predictable and routine. The plot involves a writer of murder stories, recently separated from his wife, whose life of sloth

and regret at a remote cabin is interrupted when Shooter arrives there claiming that the writer has plagiarized one of his stories. Horrible things begin to happen — screwdrivers in particular, as indicated above, keep finding their way into the living — before the inevitable climactic showdown.

Writer/director David Koepp is no genius; his *A Stir of Echoes*, which he directed, was just OK (and just barely at that), and he's written really junky scripts for popular outings such as *Jurassic Park*. Here he's adapting from a Stephen King story, and if the material seems awfully familiar (and after you learn the ending, it will), it's as much King's fault as Koepp's.

Secret Window is a kind of a cross between King's *Misery* and *The Shining*; although the ending is intended as a surprise, alert viewers will have long ago spotted the pattern that King follows when writing about writers (King's fault), or will catch the plot summation given in the complicated tracking shot with which the film begins (Koepp's). The fact is that King has been recycling his own material for many years now.

Secret Window includes among its horrors the slightest hint of cannibalism, but it's a nervous joke given King's willingness to consume his young. And with a charge of plagiarism driving the film's action, the case is made for you.

Johnny Depp plays King's stand-in here and his work is surprising. He looks almost dumpy for the film's first half; you can still spot the handsome celebrity beneath the ratty, unevenly colored hair and torn bathrobe, but it takes a little work. He's not great in these scenes, but he fills screen time inventively — he can stare into space and hold your attention doing it — and because of the complications of the plot, you only gradually come to understand that he's actually wide awake throughout. Depp's mannerisms in *Pirates of the Caribbean* were upfront; in *Secret Window* he plays his hand close to his vest, although the director doesn't bother to, and the telling nuances he allows himself, such as a scary habit of popping his jaw, grow increasingly spooky as the film moves along. At the end of *Secret Window*, Depp's character undergoes a transformation; his reborn murder writer is a marvel, almost as frightening in his own way as Turturro's Shooter.

I put some effort into liking *Secret Window*, and I almost got away with it. The director, on the other hand, seemed to exert most of his effort into giving the whole *thing* away.

Halfway through the movie, a private eye conjectures that maybe Shooter is a paid hitman who is carrying things further than his employer intended. This premise seemed like a blast to me, much more fun than the ending that I knew we were heading for. But shortly afterwards, Koepp, in a spectacularly misjudged violation of the film's point-of-view, includes a scene where Depp's ex-wife explains to her new beau that she's worried about her ex and is driving up to the cabin to check on him. Koepp isn't hinting at the ending; he's insisting on it. Instead of *Secret Window*, I'd like to officially nominate the title *Window* instead.



Hidalgo a long, tired ride

Originally published March 18, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



OLD WEST MEETS MIDDLE EAST: *Hidalgo* tries to revive the epic horse opera genre, but manages only to wear out the audience.

H

idalgo finds a connection between the Old West and the Middle East. The primary action of the film opens at Wounded Knee and ends on the coast of Syria, but the locations often seem interchangeable; with a broken-down cowboy and his mustang pictured in the foreground, the mesas and deserts of Arabia might just as well be Monument Valley instead. It's not just the geography, either; *Hidalgo* shows us lawlessness and frontier justice both way out west and far over the sea.

The opening credits for *Hidalgo* mention that the film is based on the life of one Frank Hopkins; I apologize to this man's descendents if what the movie shows is somehow accurate, but my impression is that it's based on Hopkins' life the way that *The Sound of Music* was based on those of the von Trapps.

During the year, plus preamble, chronicled in *Hidalgo* (the film is named for his horse, a mustang that he rode to victory in a grueling Arabian race called the Ocean of Fire) Hopkins is attacked by jaguars, falls into a speared trap of the sort we associate with Vietnam, rescues an heirloom

book bearing the breeding secrets for a line of Arabian steeds, is visited by the spirits of the dead, suffers a plague of locusts, rescues a man from quicksand, uncovers an internecine royal conspiracy, is invited to marry a princess, joins a circus, and so on. Hopkins, as portrayed by Viggo Mortensen, reacts very little to all of this, but then that's a genre convention.

Or at least it would be if the film were a Western, which it's not.

Hidalgo is closest in form to the old-fashioned adventure film, and, despite its much larger budget, it compares unfavorably to those films from that genre that we remember and love: *Gunga Din* from 1939, for instance, or *The Man who Would Be King* from 1975.

At 117 minutes, *Gunga Din*, long for its day, is a model of efficiency by comparison. *Hidalgo* clocks in at turgid 136. *The Man who Would Be King* had the vibrancy of stars Sean Connery and Michael Caine; I wish to be corrected if I'm wrong, but I've never seen Mortensen portray any emotion in that family.

The picture indulges in one of my pet transgressions: plot for the sake of plot. And its insincere revisionist feminism tires.

It's not fair, of course, to judge a film only against masterpieces (and I concede that the audience, including the friend I attended with, seemed to enjoy itself at a late Sunday screening). I mention those films because the screen language of *Hidalgo* invites that kind of nostalgia without satisfying it: I was hungry, watching it, for vistas not manipulated by computers, for silliness offered only as silliness, for fun unencumbered by a message of any kind.

A last note on the cast: Omar Sharif appears here as a nomadic chieftain (I was unsure of his exact title); I haven't seen him since *The Pink Panther Strikes Again* in 1976 and it was fun to watch him perform.

Said Taghmaoui, a versatile and underused actor best remembered for his torture of Mark Wahlberg in *Three Kings*, shows up, too, and I see him so rarely that I was thrilled he had gotten the work. It would be a lie by omission if I didn't reveal that I have the worst kind of crush on this guy, but in *Hidalgo* he's given so little to do, and his character is so little differentiated from the others, that even given that incentive I had trouble following him. And he didn't even take off his *turban*.



Caine delivers his best in *Statement*

Originally published March 18, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



GENOCIDAL AVERAGE JOE: Michael Caine puts in one of the finest performances of his five-decade career in Norman Jewison's latest film, *The Statement*.

T

o what extent, I wonder, is the timing of the release of Norman Jewison's new film *The Statement* a coincidence? The film deals with a Frenchman named Pierre Brossard (Michael Caine) who collaborated with the Nazis during WWII and who has lived on the run in that country since.

The coincidental part is that this war criminal is a Traditionalist Catholic who grew dissatisfied with mainstream Catholicism as a result of the reforms ratified by Vatican II in the 1970s. In this he shares the views of Mel Gibson and, perhaps more notoriously, Gibson's father. Caine's Brossard is a racist and a murderous anti-Semite, charges that I will decline to level against the Gibsons. And I likewise don't wish to imply that I suspect a Hollywood conspiracy of some sort. It just surprises to find this little-known splinter sect so much behind the headlines and on the screen this spring.

Jewison, who is best known for his outstanding work in *In the Heat of the Night* and *Fiddler on the Roof*, came of age as a director at a time when films were much more vital than they are now and when talented directors existed in abundance. Had he come along a little later, he might have been prized much more highly; as it stands, his work compares favorably with that of his heyday, if shadowed a bit by that of his more adventurous peers. Regardless, he's the right man for the job in *The Statement*, which is a complicated tale of political and judicial intrigue. He brings to

the project the taste and professionalism that's needed to pull it off.

The story goes like this: Brossard, having murdered a group of Jews during the Occupation, lives at the pleasure of a group of Catholics who belong to a shadowy order called the Chevaliers de Ste. Marie. (He once was pardoned, but a new charge of crimes against humanity has just been brought against him.) Pursuing him is a judge (Tilda Swinton) who is determined to see him brought to justice, a police commissioner (Jeremy Northam) who is acting as the judge's aide, and a group of assassins seemingly in the employ of the families whose loved ones Brossard killed. Questions arise, both in the past (who allowed Brossard to escape custody following the fall of the Vichy regime and at whose insistence was he pardoned?) and in the present (who among the Catholics would extend courtesies and payments to this man, and why?).

In the pivotal role of Brossard, Caine shines. He brings to his villain a man-in-the-street quality that makes his lapses into viciousness, racial hatred, and misogyny that much more alarming. His addled behavior, abetted by occasional bouts of panic over his heart and an abiding dim-wittedness, seems so everyday that it's impossible not to speculate that one might pass vicious-minded killers like this daily without a clue. When he explains to his long-estranged wife (Charlotte Rampling, in maybe her best performance) that her body is his property in the eyes of God, his matter-of-fact ignorance and unquestioning sense of entitlement is more chilling than most films' mass murders.

There was a vogue for Caine in the 1980s; American audiences and critics practically knighted him themselves rather than wait for the Queen. But with *The Statement* and last year's *The Quiet American*, it's tempting to say that we're getting his best work only now.

Elsewhere it's a pleasure to see Northam in a lead role; he more than holds his own in his scenes with Swinton and his all-in-the-line-of-duty demeanor is sexy in a way he's never been before. Swinton is given an extreme haircut of the sort that you suspect a crusading French judge might just wear, and she chain-smokes, too, for the benefit of American audiences. She conveys drive and determination in spades; when she and Northam are forced to bivouac together, her single-mindedness makes you grateful, for all concerned, that a sex scene was foregone.

The Statement is not all roses, but it's a decent, well-made thriller of the sort that we don't get much anymore. There's nothing shrill about it, no computer animation, never a scene in which a city explodes or even burns. I suspect it was the potential for controversy — the implication that the Catholic Church was a tacit participant in Vichy government — that got the film made at all.

Norman Jewison's restraint and intelligence, and the wonderful performances from the film's principals, were perhaps secondary considerations for the film's backers. But they're the real reason to go.



***Twisted* lacks actual twists**

Originally published March 11, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



GUN, BATHROBE, WET GIRL: Ashley Judd stars in Philip Kaufman's disappointing *Twisted*. The director has a long history of good movies, and this just isn't one of them.

T

he new Philip Kaufman film *Twisted* presents a problem for me. Kaufman has made a lot of terrific movies, among them *The Right Stuff*, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, *Henry and June*, and the 1978 remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. He has, in fact, never made a bad movie, a statement that applies to no other director I can think of with a comparable body of work.

Because I admire Kaufman, and because I don't wish for his streak of winners to end, I can't quite bring myself to write here that his new film is a failure. Although I was hired as a movie critic at *F5* expressly for the purpose of giving my opinions, please accept that in the case of *Twisted* I just don't want to say.

Twisted is about a San Francisco detective (Ashley Judd) on the trail of a serial killer who selects as his victims only men who have slept with the detective. Her new partner (Andy Garcia) and police chief-mentor (Samuel L. Jackson) strive valiantly to overlook the obvious — that Judd, with her link to the victims, drinking problem, blackouts, and proclivity for excess force — is their best suspect, but eventually she is brought in for questioning. Meanwhile questions arise for the audience about the nature of these blackouts, and we're given to wonder if Judd herself isn't the likely next victim.

It wasn't only the title that made me alert for a twist in this tired material (at least three films with similar synopses play nightly on HBO); it was also my admiration for Kaufman. My

expectations were likewise heightened by the fact that the film was written by a woman (Sarah Thorp) since proceedings like these tend usually to be testosterone-driven affairs, last year's laborious *In the Cut* excepted. But really *Twisted* offers no new perspective on the usual serial killer picture. Its differences derive from minor matters, such as the fact the victims here are men.

I'm not sure what to make of the fact that Judd appears in yet another of these pictures. (She played similar roles in *Kiss the Girls*, *Double Jeopardy*, and *A Time to Kill*, again opposite Jackson). Is it becoming a fetish? Typecasting, for her, is well underway, and she has better range than these roles show.

Andy Garcia seems to have come back to life in the film's first half — he's playful, credible, and on his feet — but the second half mires him, and the tired actor of *The Ties that Bind* reemerges.

Samuel L. Jackson is still a pleasant diversion, but it may soon come time for him to cut down on the astronomical number of roles he accepts and even to read the scripts in advance.

Twisted isn't all a waste. Even in its sleepy second half the film looks and feels like that of a born filmmaker; you can read the director's skill in every scene, as you can in the works of Spielberg or Oliver Stone, even if the scene doesn't take.

There's an alarming sequence at the opening in which Kaufman's trademark gift for charged eroticism — memorably showcased in the NC-17-rated *Henry and June* — is displaced onto a murderer who fondles a victim with hair-raising sensuousness. And adventurous casting makes for an unusually interesting supporting cast.

But there's more than the threadbare material working against it; the underlit interiors and gloomy art direction were off-putting even before they became clichéd, the obviousness of the plot misleads, the "slow reveal" (a device by which the truth of the plot is only gradually made known to the audience) arrives at the killer's identity only to find the audience long since there and waiting.

I kept hoping for more — for an explanation of Kaufman's involvement, for a twist that might surprise, for anything that might redeem this dire undertaking. But I was still vainly hoping when the lights and canned music came on.

It could be that Kaufman is hard-pressed for work; Orson Welles was, proof positive that Hollywood values box office over ability. And I won't say that *Twisted* is bad — no one can make me — although I wouldn't recommend it on a dare. Let's end it by saying that it's the least of this gifted director's works. Here's to a brighter tomorrow.



***Club Dread* disappoints, badly**

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by [Jake Euker](#)



BROKEN PROMISES: *Club Dread*, made by the comedy troupe Broken Lizard, fails to deliver on any promise built up by the group's earlier effort, *Super Troopers*.

I can sincerely report that I'm a fan of the comedy troupe Broken Lizard, based at least on their 2001 comedy *Super Troopers*. Some of my colleagues in the critical community would want to have my badge for that, but who reads movie critics? I don't. And so it is that I walked into the troupe's new offering *Club Dread* completely unwarned.

I loved *Superstar*. So while I might not have believed the reviews anyway, the sheer mass of negative energy *Club Dread* has generated in the press might have given me pause. I found out too late, but I hereby lend my voice to that swelling chorus. *Club Dread* arrives in the theaters dead on the screen.

A parody of slasher flicks, *Club Dread* chronicles a series of killings at an island resort operated by a drunken Jimmy Buffett-type singer (Bill Paxton). The staff of this resort is assembled from the Broken Lizard performers (Jay Chandrasekhar, Erik Stolhanske, Steve Lemme, Kevin Leffernan, Marisa Coughlan, and Paul Stoter); they are each given a character that's a stretch: Chandrasekhar, who also directed, plays a dully unamused Rastafarian tennis coach, for instance, and Lemme a Latino dance instructor with a thick accent and plucked eyebrows. These characters are the joke in *Club Dread*, and they're not enough to sustain it. There's nothing else

there.

Or rather, what else there is is painful. A running joke in the film (perhaps the only running joke in the film) is that shrieking, unexpected shock attacks by the killer punctuate the narrative every few minutes. Maybe this was funny on paper, but in the theater it amounted to a physical assault on the audience. I thought I might have a stroke; I am now too old, I reasoned, for suspense. But after we left (which was not exactly at the end), my twenty-year-old companion mentioned that she had thought she was dying, too.

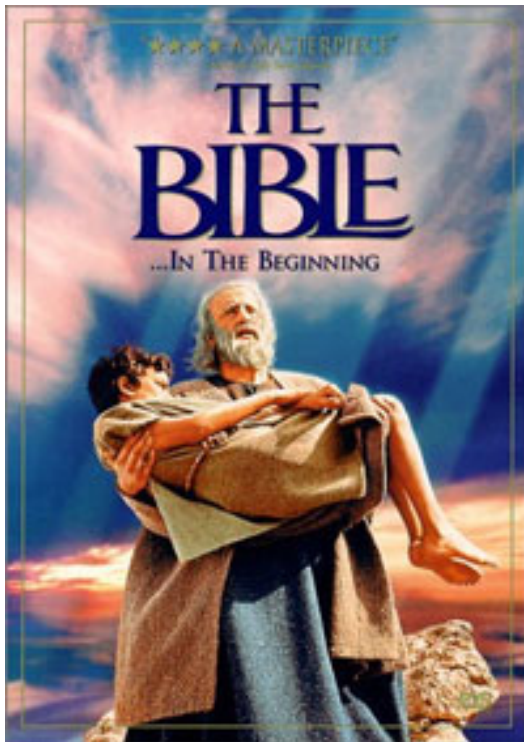
What actually dies is *Club Dread*. It's not just a matter of bad conception; it's a matter of too-thin material, a scarcity of jokes, sloppy direction (a problem that *Super Troopers* conquered by a thin margin), and a cast so enervated that I began to wonder if there had been sickness on the set. My hope is that the performers of Broken Lizard haven't tired of one another; I hope they still have another movie in them and a little creative fire. There wasn't a spark on view here.



DVD Pick O The Week: *The Bible*

Originally published March 11, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



W

ith *The Passion of the Christ* dividing audiences and, to some extent, critics this year, Easter threatens to be more divisive for cinephiles in 2004 than even the Oscars. Why not reminisce about those peaceful millennia preceding Gibson's ghastly film — or, for that matter, the New Testament — in the company of a biblical epic with far more style and less literal meat?

Made in 1966, and recently released on the cheap on DVD, John Huston's wonderfully strange screen epic *The Bible* tells the story of a tempestuous God's interaction with mankind from the days of Genesis through the Flood.

The movie is poshly produced for its day: the screen is awash in pastels for the Creation, the Garden of Eden is a vision from Odilon Redon, and the transformation of Satan into a snake is creepy in a marvelous, uniquely pre-CGI way.

The special effects here are special. When, for instance, Peter O'Toole appears as the Three Angels, his face shifts from the body of one angel to another as their faces become visible. Today a filmmaker could do more — as in *The Matrix* films, there might be legions of O'Tooles — but the limitations of available effects forced Huston to use that sterling substitution for technology: imagination. If only Gibson had had *that* tool.

I describe Huston's God as tempestuous, because checking the source material, that's how Huston found Him to be. *The Bible* portrays a kind God too, of course, but when, for instance, He curses the Tower of Babel (a wonderful, surreal vision in the film) His motives are to punish; Huston complies. *The Bible* beautifully evokes an Old Testament world where the higher power plays a very direct managerial role, reminding us too why, in daily parlance, "biblical" so often precedes "wrath."

Huston is also the problem with *The Bible*; playing Noah, he cloy, and his direction gets soggy in the Flood. The visuals are still magnificent as the animals board the Ark and water covers the earth, but the foreground action too often involves the antics of cuddly apes. Elsewhere the casting can be distracting; Ava Gardner as Sarah comes to mind.

But the breadth, intelligence, and imagination of Huston's work in *The Bible* makes for real screen magic. It's a true epic from the days — pre-Spielberg, and long before Mel Gibson's bloody-minded horror — when that genre still held the power to elicit wonder and something like genuine awe.



***Christ* dies for Melís sins**

Originally published March 4, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



ALWAYS LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE OF LIFE: The amazingly violent *The Passion of the Christ* has little else to offer ó as a film it has no other narrative. The film offers such a long and graphic picture of torture that the audience would feel sympathy for any man.



SOMETHING ABOUT MARY: Monica Bellucci is pretty much wasted as Mary Magdalen, a character that is just a footnote in such a bloody and violent film.

W

ere it not for its subject matter, Mel Gibson's third directorial effort, *The Passion of the Christ*, would surely have received the NC-17 rating it deserves. Frame for frame, the film is graphic

beyond any general release in my experience, and its depiction of Jesus Christ's torture and crucifixion is literal and relentless. Imagining Travis Bickle's climactic rampage in *Taxi Driver*, with infrequent breaks, extended to feature length, provides a watery reference point. I feel that there are no circumstances under which it should be shown to a child or a young teenager. Without its religious context, *The Passion of the Christ* would be either condemned by the right and its pundits, or would pass by unseen.

The director (who also co-wrote with Benedict Fitzgerald) supplies the justification: that the suffering of Christ was literal. He has been quoted on ABC as saying, however earnestly, that the film's screenplay was the New Testament and its director the Holy Ghost. He explained in *The New Yorker* that he sought to use the film's violence to bring Christ's suffering alive for the viewer, and the article goes on to say that in post-production he worked with his editor to tone down the graphicness of the images.

My prayer, then, is that there is no director's cut. I am not prudish on the issue of violence in films, but *The Passion of the Christ*, like *Man Bites Dog* and Pasolini's *Salò, the 120 Days of Sodom*, ventures into territory for which there may be no justification; it could be that if you wish to inflict violence this intense on an audience, you need to admit upfront that you're working through personal issues and let it rip. It's little wonder for me that audiences are reacting strongly to it — how could they not? — but I do wonder at those who find inspiration in its unconscionable brutality. Does *The Exorcist* also renew their faith? *The Passion of the Christ* takes one of mankind's key tales of grace and redemption and reduces it to horror.

Faith provides not just the justification for *The Passion of the Christ*, which begins with Christ's betrayal at Gethsemane and ends with his resurrection, but also its frame of reference; without the bigger context of Christianity, the film has no plot, no dramatic structure, and no character delineation. Watching it will be an act of contrition for many, and in that way faith may provide the film with an audience as well.

Seeing it as a movie critic, many problems arise. The mechanics of the film aren't bad — Gibson can place a camera, for instance, although he sometimes crowds — but the performances (in the dead languages of ancient Latin and Aramaic) are hard to judge since they don't develop; the director throws you into the action without any setup. He's betting that you know the story, and even though you do, narrative film is a form that needs shape, and there is none here. Instead, *The Passion of the Christ* has only its violence to hold its structure together, and this is arranged into set pieces — Christ's arrest, his scourging with whips, his journey to Calvary, and his crucifixion — with momentary breaks for trials. Brief flashbacks touch very lightly on Christ's teachings, but these are blown off the screen by his torture; I had trouble staying tuned in during the hiatuses.

The film manipulates the audience at the crudest level. The graphic portrayal of two hours of torture is bound to elicit audience sympathy for any man; if even Osama bin Laden were thus excoriated, most viewers, in their hearts, would wish for it to end. How to explain to weeping audience members at the conclusion that they've been played, that Gibson has flubbed his resurrection in dramatic terms by eschewing moderation and pacing, that a better and more balanced film would have made them feel more?

Jim Caviezel plays Jesus; it strikes me that he, like all the actors, is several shades too light for a

film that purports to historical accuracy. Mary is played by Maia Morgenstern, with Monica Bellucci, whom I always look forward to seeing, thrown away as Magdalen. As Caiphus, Mattia Sbragia chews the scenery with some gusto, but his performance has nowhere to proceed and his single note tires.

Gibson, in interviews, has reported that he was divinely guided to produce and direct *The Passion of the Christ*. He has taken pains to present his film as a straightforward reenactment of the passion as presented in the Gospels, as though a straight reading requires no interpretation, as though he was merely channeling a higher power. But the film is tricked out in special effects, such as a baby, held by Satan, with an inhumanly old face and a hairy back, that is present at one bloodbath; this seems to me to be far less John, Luke, Mark, and Matthew and far more *Stigmata*. Clichés, when they sneak in, are that much harder to accept; the spoken Latin, for instance, sounds a lot like Russian, and Pontius Pilate (Hristo Shopov) thus comes across as a Khrushchev-derived Cold War villain. Judas is treated to the sight of a maggot-infested corpse, an image that was already unwelcome in *Poltergeist* way back in 1982. And again there's the incredible brutality.

How brutal is it? Gibson's Christ on the road to Calvary, scourged inhumanly with whips, blood hanging off of him in strings, collapses deadweight beneath the enormous weight of the cross he bears. The camera lingers on his fall in slow motion, recording his impact on the hard dirt, the crushing weight of the cross falling upon him, a thorn from his crown driven into his scalp. Perhaps there are some so literal-minded that they take a lesson from the gruesomeness of these images. What do they learn the fifth time that he thusly falls?

Here is what I really have to say: I feel that I shouldn't have been subjected to the sickening excess of *The Passion of the Christ*. It angered me, but its primary effect was to make me heartsick. And the facility and crassness with which Gibson explains it away — that this really happened, that people need to understand the extent of Christ's suffering — is cause for real despair. When he remarks that the Holy Ghost directed, he exhibits an enormously ignorant insensitivity, as though this story, central to Western civilization and the core of literally billions of people's spiritual lives, were somehow now claimed as his own. The story of Christ's passion is experienced by legions of Christians, Jews, and Muslims at a deeply personal level; surely they have the right to claim ownership too?

Stripped of the context of Gibson's messianic claims, *The Passion of the Christ* becomes one privileged man's interpretation of the Gospels and a grotesque, unstructured film. He's entitled to it, but he's then obliged to take his lumps, too, and since most of us don't have \$25 million of our own to spend refuting the brutality of his vision, it's bound to grate a little. In interviews, Gibson is not taking this graciously; rather, he projects fear of imminent martyrdom himself. He's adopted the position that ecumenical and Jewish groups are nitpicking over trivial points and that his only crime was that he chose to make a movie on the subject of Christ.

But that's not it. Gibson's crime, as he well knows, is that he's leveraged his wealth and celebrity to present a deeply personal, horrific, inflammatory call to arms, to present it implicitly as literal "truth," and to do so within a context that serves as its own justification. Peace, inclusion, and love were not on his mind. There are, as he claims endlessly, Jews who are presented sympathetically in the film, but it's not only Jews who should be frightened and offended.

Viewing such atrocities against humankind as those presented in *The Passion of the Christ*, it's natural that one should wish to identify the culprit. This is Mel Gibson's vision. Mel Gibson's it.



Triplets est très bon

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by [Jake Euker](#)



A DIFFERENT FRENCH FILM: *The Triplets of Belleville* is an odd and unpredictable cartoon about a bicyclist kidnaped by the mob and forced to generate electricity while an old woman and her dog search for him.

R

egardless of what it is you're expecting from the new animated French film *The Triplets of Belleville*, the movie you'll see isn't it. It's not quirky, it's not cute and it's not smart, exactly. It is, rather, a very personal fantasy, deeply flawed in parts, and so strange (and strangely executed) that you sometimes feel excluded from it even as you're drawn in. When it connects, as it often does, it's an amazingly lyric film, too; there are images in *The Triplets of Belleville* that are sheer magic, that somehow manage the trick of seeming both timeless and brand new. It's not a great film, but then again, it is.

Among the first of the surprises, for me, was the fact that the film is not set in Belleville, the colorful Parisian *quartier* (until recently a poor Arab district that is now, I understand, becoming

fashionable), but rather an imaginary, New York-derived American city *named* Belleville to which a young cyclist named Champion is abducted after being snatched from the Tour de France by square-shouldered gangsters.

These gangsters put Champion and a couple of other hapless Frenchmen into evil service in Belleville (the name translates as "beautiful city"), using their cycling stamina to power wine-bottling machinery and betting on them as if they were horses (they actually whinny when exhausted, and one is shot, as in *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*); it is up to Champion's grandmother (Mme. Souza) and dog Bruno to follow Champion to Belleville and save the day.

In this, the two are aided by the title triplets, now-elderly showgirls who once were stars but now live in Belleville's slums and on its late-late show. These jazz-age celebrities once had a hit called "Belleville Rendezvous," and the tune haunts *The Triplets of Belleville* the way these eccentric women haunt the city: shadowy, penniless presences, fashionable once, now half-remembered ghosts.

It's all very strange, but there's an essential theme here about the ways in which women nurture and about how that succor goes unnoticed. Champion is trained for the Tour de France by his grandmother in the film's opening scenes, and we see her quietly keeping up with him mile for mile, then preparing his dinner, fixing his bicycle, and hauling his passed-out body to its bed.

Champion is a rail-thin, road-hypnotized automaton who only knows to bicycle; he doesn't speak for the film's duration, and when he finally does, he finds that Mme. Souza is gone without his having noticed. She's a taskmaster, but the triplets, on the other hand, represent a more chaotic, muse-driven feminine energy (and their music, which is really beautiful — hypnotic and genuinely weird — matches their surreal conception note for note). In the end, this theme is unreadably concluded; there's cause to wonder who's saved whom, and whether or not the ending is a happy one. Is this vagueness deliberate or is it a flaw? It's hard to say.

The locations play at least as large a part as the theme. Before they leave France, the Souzas live in a village home, which neighboring Paris encroaches on year by year until a Metro track crowds the windows. But when Champion is kidnapped to Belleville, and his grandmother and dog follow, we see a true urban nightmare, an impossibly vertical Gotham where an overweight Statue of Liberty holding a hamburger greets newcomers and where hallways are filled with cockroaches, whores, and johns, and wastelands filled with mutant frogs border the slums.

I can well understand how the French, makers not of "french fries" but *pommes frites*, might be justifiably pissed at America at present, but these first scenes in an imaginary, hybrid New York are far too sophomoric in their America-bashing. There are too many images of overweight Americans, the film's handling of the problem of the homeless is too crass, there are too many hamburgers served.

The introduction of the triplets, whom Mme. Souza magically summons by poking out a tune on a discarded bike wheel, at first seem a continuation of this, another French stab at Americans for not appreciating what's best about our own culture.

But as we get to know these eccentric marvels, their meanings — and those of Belleville — are

deepened and somehow dissembled.

Drawn like Hanna-Barbara vultures, the triplets dress in shabby furs, live in incomparable squalor, and — in a wildly misconceived test of our sympathies — dine with relish on the icky mutant frogs, some of whom escape the dinner table still alive.

Like many of *The Triplets of Belleville*'s characters, these sisters have animal traits; specifically, they squawk like birds rather than speak, and they bat their ancient, long hands about like useless wings.

What sustains them is their obliviousness to their own declined state and their music, which they coax from such unlikely instruments as a refrigerator, a vacuum, and a newspaper. Seen this way, they somehow soften the horrors of the nightmarish urban isolation in which they live; they become an extension of it, an acknowledgment that places like Belleville might flower in unexpected ways. Our sympathies toward them vacillate, but then

see "Triplets" page 12

nothing in the film is easily read as sympathetic or not, hopeful or not. In *The Triplets of Belleville*, you keep waiting for redemption — for Champion to express his love of his grandmother, for the triplets to show a human face, for the powers-that-be to intervene on behalf of what's right — and you're still waiting when you get home.

Together, the triplets, grandmother, and loyal dog trace clues to Champion's whereabouts, arriving at last at the evil headquarters of the French Wine Association, where a dramatic escape from the gangsters who run this cartel is orchestrated. In the film's finale, the triplets, the grandmother, Champion, and Bruno the dog escape down a nighttime road on a fantastic wheeled contraption, resembling a ship, on whose sails vintage footage of the Tour de France is projected. It's a marvelous image, a striking example of cinematic mythmaking at its most evocative. But the crew of this fantastic vessel is headed not to the comforts of home across the sea, but aimlessly into the night. Is there no home left to these women? In an earlier scene, Mme. Souza rescues one of the frogs from dinner; she helps it out the window where, in a Buñuelian twist, it's immediately crushed by a train. Is this ending an extension of that message of futility? Are we meant to scorn these women for throwing their lives away, to applaud them for their loyalty, both? *The Triplets of Belleville* won't, or can't, say.

Many images in this film are strange and remarkable, and the humor is often ingenious, such as a running gag about how Bruno (who recalls the dogs of George Booth) enjoys barking at passing trains; at home, the trains passed hourly, but when he arrives at the Triplets' tenement in Belleville the el screams past so relentlessly that he never gets a break and eventually gives up, whimpering. I loved it for these moments, but what to make of the film's tone, its strange vacillation between the hopeful and the arbitrarily cold, is still a mystery to me.

And maybe it's better that way. I'm not a fan of post-modern catchall, but the strange magic of *The Triplets of Belleville* might derive in part from its chimerical slippage. It invites a close reading - its images are far from arbitrary - but when you think you've got it, it wriggles away. What's left is a unique, conflicted vision, comic, poetic, and hopeless by turn. It frustrates your expectations as you're watching it, but then, like the triplets' hit song, you can't quite drive it

from your head. Is it also somehow *fun*? I can't fully explain why, but I just loved this film.

A final note: *The Triplets of Belleville* is wonderfully drawn, and its conception and direction is the work of 40-year-old Sylvain Chomet. Among the treasures that the triplets leave behind when they escape Belleville is a trio of overweight Oscars that stand on their mantle, and now Chomet is up for a big, fat Oscar himself for Best Animated Film. His previous work includes comic books and a short entitled *The Old Lady and the Pigeons*. I haven't seen all the films Chomet will be competing against (there's *Finding Nemo*), but I wish him and his weirdly personal film good luck just the same.



Eurotrip is just painfully unfunny

Originally published February 26, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



TOO LATE FOR OSCARS: The "actors" in *Eurotrip*, a "comedy," display the fresh, clean faces of homophobia.

G

ay is funny, right? Maybe there really are people out there who just can't get enough of the kind of joke where the punch line is that a character is gay. Or the pope. That's funny, too. If you just love that kind of humor, and, somehow, you're also miraculously over the age of 17, take my

advice and race right out to see *Eurotrip* this minute.

Eurotrip, which was produced by Alec Berg and Daniel Goldberg (*Road Trip*, *Old School*) and directed by Jeff Schaffer (a writer on *Cat in the Hat*), is about four high school graduates who take a trip to Europe to meet a German e-mail acquaintance of one of the young men (Scotty, played by Scott Mechlowicz). After meeting in Paris, the four suffer misadventures of the sort that likely end in a misunderstanding concerning a gay man or the Pope before Scotty and his German friend (Jessica Boehrs) consummate their e-mail relationship in a confessional at the Vatican.

Rounding out the hilarious foursome are Scotty's best friend Cooper (Jacob Pitts), and the twins Jenny (Michelle Trachtenberg) and Jamie (Travis Wester). I'm unfamiliar with all four of these young performers, but I will say that only Trachtenberg shows any real ability with comedy, and that Pitts is either closely related to David Spade or somehow channels him in his performance. Recognizable celebrities such as Matt Damon and Lucy Lawless show up from time to time in cameos, but Buster Keaton himself couldn't redeem most of the material here.

About halfway through *Eurotrip* I began to try to imagine a way in which it might end amusingly. I had the idea that maybe wild animals could very suddenly attack and slaughter our funny four as they sat at an outdoor cafe; I envisioned this as a fairly bloody attack, graphic along the lines of *The Passion of the Christ*, and possibly in slow motion. My reasoning was that my proposed ending would add some surprise. I pitched it to the friend I was with in a normal speaking voice — no one in the theater cared by this point — but he was either asleep already or simply lacked the energy to respond.



Monster is killer

Originally published February 12, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



THE MONSTER INSIDE: Charlize Theron (right) creates an emotionally messy, powerful character that has earned her a Golden Globe and an Oscar nomination. Christina Ricci plays her vulnerable foil.

L

ast week, in my year-in-review column, I named Scarlett Johansson as my pick for best actress of last year for her work in *Lost in Translation*. She shone in that film, but this week Charlize Theron blew me away (and, as serial killer Aileen Wuornos, at least five other men) in the 2003 release *Monster*.

Theron did more than gain a much-publicized 30-some pounds for the role of this perennial loser who, in the 1980s, began to murder men to keep her girlfriend's material appetites sated; as Wuornos, Theron gets so far inside her character that you can't connect her, physically or otherwise, to the beautiful actress who lightened *The Astronaut's Wife*, *The Yards*, or any of the other work she's done. She takes a giant risk in *Monster* that's more than making herself unattractive. She inhabits her monster so completely that Hollywood may never accept her back again as she was.

Wuornos was an actual person, maybe America's first female serial killer, and she was put to death in Florida in 2002.

As Theron portrays her, she's hyper, ungainly, and she has a survival instinct that busts through

the cheap reality of her life as a hooker.

The energy that Theron plugs into threatens to explode the scenes she's in, and at first I worried that her performance was so much a stunt that her director, Patty Jenkins, would be unable to control her, that she would topple the film. But Jenkins more than manages the task; she not only controls Theron's wild energy, she directs it into the dynamics of the story. Working together, the two pull off an original killer biopic. It's the best film of this kind that I've ever seen.

Not least among *Monster's* virtues is the fact that it finds its story and sticks to it. Killer biopics tend to emphasize the gruesomeness or the inevitability of the murders they chronicle, with a couple of details — or, worse, flashbacks — thrown in to indicate that the killer's childhood was not a happy one. *Monster* avoids this sensationalist approach and its accompanying gum ball psychology by concentrating instead on Wuornos's relationship with Selby, her girlfriend during the time of the killings.

There's no sensationalism tied to this lesbian relationship, either; rather, the film introduces the two as they meet, shows Wuornos's reluctance to return Selby's romantic feelings, and then shows us why, after her tawdry encounters with men and Selby's basic decency toward her, she might choose to return those feelings after all.

Monster also takes pains to introduce the rationale by which Wuornos rationalizes killing her johns and her desperation when her rationalizations fail her.

The first of her victims beats her and ties her to his car; he means to kill her, but Wuornos discovers his gun and uses it. She tries to find the same viciousness in each of her victims, whether it's there or not, and kids herself that the money she takes from them when they're dead is a kind of bounty.

By the end of the film, when she cold-bloodedly murders a man who's not even her john and means only to help her, Theron shows us, vividly, that Wuornos sees the same murder we do.

Meanwhile director Jenkins keeps us focused on the relationship.

Selby (beautifully played by Christina Ricci) is succinctly painted as a woman who is vulnerable to the point that she's not quite capable of taking care of herself. In the beginning, Wuornos's crazy attention flatters her, but she begins to be embarrassed by the other woman's uncouthness.

In Selby, Jenkins shows us a woman at odds with herself, one who wants desperately to pull away but who has no other place to go. A scene involving a minor car accident, in particular, says as much about these two characters as most directors can pack into an entire film; though the wreck is pivotal in plot terms, it's the dynamics of the characters that prevent you from looking away.

Monster doesn't sort everything out for you; it doesn't ask for your sympathy for Wuornos or your condemnation of her either. Rather, it leaves you with a tangle of emotions for her: pity, fear, anger, even affection. When she lashes out at the judge who condemns her to death, accusing him of emotional bankruptcy for sending a rape victim to the electric chair, you see it as the pathetic, last-ditch cry for sympathy that it is. You *do* sympathize with her, even as you see

through her.

It's a triumph for Theron and Jenkins that this ending pulls you in different directions. Emotionally, it's messy, but that's how life is.



Enjoyable *Agent* a welcome break

Originally published February 12, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



ACCIDENTAL FAMILY: Peter Dinklage, Patricia Clarkson and Bobby Cannavale play a group of oddballs pushed together by personal tragedies.

T

he *Station Agent*, written and directed by erstwhile actor Thomas McCarthy, has the same quirky charm — and essentially the same plot — as films such as 1987's *Bagdad Cafe*. In that film, an exotic German woman begins work at a roadside cafe after leaving her husband; among her co-workers and cafe regulars, she finds a mix of true characters, and the group forms a bond. *That* film owed a debt to 1974's *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*. It might almost be a subgenre; call it the Accidental Family film.

What these films need is an unusual central figure who is working through a crisis. In *The Station Agent*, our hero is a dwarf named Fin (Peter Dinklage) whose career as a railroad miniaturist is ended when his boss dies suddenly and their shop is closed. The deceased leaves Fin a small lot in rural New Jersey on which an abandoned railway station stands, and Fin takes his savings and moves in.

The characters Fin encounters there include a young, good-looking Italian-American named Joe (Bobby Cannavale), who has come from New York City to work his ailing dad's coffee wagon, and whose expansive personality requires a constant audience; Cleo (Raven Goodwin), a young black girl who hangs out on the railroad cars on Fin's property and who memorably asks Fin what grade he's in; and, most significantly, Olivia (Patricia Clarkson), a divorced artist who recently lost her young son and who is spacey and accident-prone to the extent that she nearly runs Fin over in her SUV the first two times she encounters him. Fin, Joe and Olivia begin to hang out together almost accidentally; when Olivia has a crisis of her own, their bond is tested.

Director McCarthy deserves much credit for the restraint he shows in directing *The Station Agent* and for the dignity he allows his characters. (In today's films, it's a given that Fin, being a dwarf, will receive the director's respect, and I almost credit McCarthy more for treating Joe amiably.) He manages plenty of humor without overdoing it, and he refuses cheap gags at every turn.

Is the melodrama as restrained? Usually; although Olivia's material runs close to the line during her breakdown, I was impressed that Joe is allowed to make it to the end credits without once turning sentimental over the prospect of losing his father. Fin is drawn as a man with a chip on his shoulder (and I was embarrassed for him at a scene in a bar where he makes a disturbance over his height), but he's portrayed first as a man. In this, the director is aided by a very fine performance from Dinklage, who has worked steadily since his debut in 1995's *Living in Oblivion*. Patricia Clarkson, who is an Oscar nominee this year for her performance in *Pieces of April*, plays Olivia well, if a little self-consciously.

The Station Agent is a very funny little movie. A friend was upset with me for not loving it, as she had, but I think that the temptation is to over-praise it; it's enjoyable and a welcome break from the big studio pictures, and I liked it a lot, just as I liked *Bagdad Cafe* or even *Local Hero*. But like those movies, it's familiar to you even as you're watching it. And it's so slight a film that in a year or so, despite the glowing reviews, you may find that no one remembers it much at all.



flicks of 2003

...but Jake considers it the worst year in film in decades.

Originally published February 5, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)

BAD MOVIE,
GOOD
MOVIE

REDUX: Both
Jake and Jason
gave best
performance by
an actress in a
bad film honors
to the timeless
Diane Keaton
(top left) for
her role in
Somethings
Gotta Give.

Jake chose
Bruce
Almighty as
the worst film
of 2003, then
went on to
select Morgan
Freeman (top
right) for worst
performance by
an actor in a
bad film for his
work in Bruce
and the
godawful
Dreamcatcher.

On the other
hand, Jake
picked
S.W.A.T.
(right) as 2003s
best picture.
Do you think
L.L.s biceps
had anything to
do with it?

O

h my god, you guys, am I ever glad that's over with. "That," of course, is the year in film of 2003;

with a little distance, I believe, we'll be able to objectively view it as the obverse of 1975 or 1939, two years legendary for their extraordinary films. I believe, in fact, that we've just passed through a historic period: the worst year in film in the past three decades or more.

What went wrong? Well, what *didn't*? The pool of talented directors has shrunk to a new low in my filmgoing life; directors of debatable ability have been allowed to bloat their product to indulgent, unprecedented lengths; Hollywood has succumbed completely and finally to the Spielberg-derived, blockbuster-driven production mindset; "indie" films have been reduced to low-budget copies of already tired Hollywood fare; Miramax has co-opted irretrievably the "interesting" or "adult" feature (culminating in the wasteland of *Cold Mountain*); action directors, beaten down by the MTV fast-cut film school aesthetic, produce absolutely incomprehensible action; *mise-en-scène* has vanished from the screen; films with a little content, such as *In the Cut* and *Cold Creek Manor*, are booed by audiences and critics alike; and the pseudo-philosophy and -theology of the *Matrix* films is treated as content instead.

Abroad, the problem worsens: Iran has dried up creatively, France has, at best, Olivier Assayas to offer, Zhang Yimou has taken an alarming turn toward the sentimental. Does only Wong Kar-Wai remain?

And I don't even want to talk about fucking Quentin Tarantino.

1997, to use a recent example, was bad, producing as it did *Anaconda*, *The Saint*, *Air Force One*, *Batman and Robin*, *Con Air*, *Speed 2*, *Dante's Peak*, and so on, ad nauseum. *As Good As It Gets*, one of the most embarrassingly manipulative movies ever produced anywhere, swept the acting Oscars, and *Titanic*, a good-ish movie, took best picture. But 1997 produced *Jackie Brown* (excuse above paragraph), *L.A. Confidential*, and *Boogie Nights* as well. The critically acclaimed films in 2003 that I missed were *Mystic River*, *City of God*, and *American Splendor*, but among those I saw, not one can match any of the 1997 titles listed above. And unless *Mystic River* and the others rank with *The Battleship Potemkin*, *The Godfather Part 2*, and *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* respectively, they're not enough to save the year.

However, a ten-best list, at the insistence of my friend and colleague Jason Bailey, must be produced. I present it now with grave misgivings.

BEST FILM OF 2003: *S.W.A.T.* I've been through this before, and no, I'm not kidding. Polished, professional, and shot with clear and understandable action, *S.W.A.T.* was the rare 2003 release with an honest goal: to give the audience something rather than to show off the wit and finesse (imagined or not) of the director. *S.W.A.T.* rocked, and clocking in at under two hours, it was a model of filmmaking efficiency. It was somehow charming too, a quality that I attribute to a kind of friendly retro feel that dominated the entire proceedings. Do I expect another great film from director Clark Johnson? Well, no, not really. But, for my money, *S.W.A.T.* was enough.

RUNNERS-UP: Aleksandr Sokurov's *Russian Ark* amounts to a milestone in filmmaking; it was a masterpiece to rank with history's greats, and a shoo-in for best film of its year... which was 2002. I mention it here, as well as 2001's exquisitely funny *Songs from the Second Floor*, by Swede Roy Andersson, only because they had their Wichita premieres in 2003. Elsewhere the year belonged to documentaries: the charming, suspenseful *Spellbound*, Brazil's wire-taught *Bus 174* (which showed at last fall's Tallgrass Film Festival, and which was also, technically, a 2002

release), and the extraordinary and scrupulous Andrew Jarecki film *Capturing the Friedmans*.

Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* deserves a mention, despite a cold center (like her *The Virgin Suicides* of a few years ago), and a slim narrative that overstays its welcome. *Finding Nemo* exhibited a lot of wit, although in a better year I would not be listing this title, and *Johnny English* was the throwaway comedy of the year. I enjoyed *The Matrix Reloaded* immensely (despite all its attendant horseshit), *Pirates of the Caribbean* for Johnny Depp's daring and explosively funny performance, and *Cabin Fever* for its sheer, hell-for-leather audacity and bad taste.

For all that, the year's second best film has to have been *Out of Time*, Carl Franklin's wonderful thriller. Its welcome sense of restraint powered it; my guess is that audiences and critics overlooked it for this same reason. Jim Sheridan's *In America*, for similar reasons, places third. *The Good Thief*, a 2002 release abroad, was a truly great crime caper. And I would be remiss to not give Alejandro González Iñárritu's *21 Grams* a gratified nod.

WORST FILM OF 2003: *Bruce Almighty* — I wrote what I hope was a blistering review of this horrifying piece of stink at the time of its release, and I don't have the energy to revisit it here — you have no idea how *much* energy that would entail. There were, technically, worse films released in 2003, but none that I could hate more. **RUNNERS-UP:** Let's see, where to begin? There were *House of the Dead*, *Tears of the Sun*, *Daddy Day Care*, *Gigli*, *Stuck on You*, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, *Freddy Vs. Jason*, *The Haunted Mansion*, *Dreamcatcher*, *Gothika*, *The Real Canc'n*, *Love Actually*, *Seabiscuit*, *Identity*, *Underworld*, *The Cat in the Hat*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and, because critics are allowed to fine tune their opinions, *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*.

BEST DOCUMENTARY: *Bus 174*, so in the moment that it remains indelible in my memory, although a couple of fine, close seconds are mentioned above.

BEST PERFORMANCE BY AN ACTOR: I can't settle this tie: Johnny Depp, a complete original in *Pirates of the Caribbean* and Dennis Quaid, who rendered man's inscrutable instincts visible in the otherwise disappointing *Cold Creek Manor*. Having thus cheated, I forgo runners-up. In supporting roles, Alec Baldwin stole *The Cooler*; my runner-up choice is Shia LaBeouf, magic as the imprisoned child in *Holes*.

BEST PERFORMANCE BY AN ACTRESS: Scarlett Johansson in *Lost In Translation*, with a scarily vulnerable Holly Hunter in *Thirteen* as my runner-up choice. In supporting roles, Sharon Stone was amazing and unreadable in *Cold Creek Manor*, a triumph despite the material; Siobhan Fallon gets my runner-up nod, again for *Holes*.

BEST PERFORMANCE BY AN ACTOR IN A BAD FILM: Bill Nighy, *Love Actually*.

BEST PERFORMANCE BY AN ACTRESS IN A BAD FILM: Diane Keaton, *Something's Gotta Give*.

WORST PERFORMANCE BY AN ACTOR IN A BAD FILM: Morgan Freeman, *Bruce Almighty*, *Dreamcatcher*.

WORST PERFORMANCE BY AN ACTRESS IN A BAD FILM: Demi Moore, *Charlie's Angel's: Full Throttle*.

MOST OVERRATED FILM: *LOTR: Return of the King*; it's not bad, but oh my god is it overrated.

MOST UNDERRATED FILM: *Out Of Time*.

MOVIE JASON WAS MOST WRONG ABOUT: *Russian Ark*, as I just learned reading his proofs for this piece. *Gerry*, which Jason liked, follows on its heels.

BEST BAD FILM: *Jeepers Creepers 2*.

MOVIE I MOST WOULD'VE HATED, HAD I SEEN IT: *Radio*. The trailer and Jason's review are as close as I ever hope to get.

MOST WELCOME NUDITY: Did Ewan McGregor not take his clothes off this year? Amazing, and infinitely disappointing too. I'll settle for the opening scenes of Cillian Murphy in the hospital in *28 Days Later...*

LEAST WELCOME NUDITY: The interchangeable cast of *The Real Canc'n*.

DUMBEST CAREER MOVE: One can only hope that Mel Gibson won his year-long fight with his studio to release his upcoming Jesus film in unsubtitled Aramaic.

BEST TRAILER: *Dreamcatcher* had me fooled; points to the trailer's producers for not including the giant, rectal, alien worms.

BEST DVD: Criterion's amazing double-disc release of *The Killers* restored both the 1946 and 1964 classic versions of the Hemingway story to the video shelves, and included a Tarkovsky short film from the same material as well.

MOST LOOKING FORWARD TO: Bertolucci's *The Dreamers*, Wes Anderson's *The Life Aquatic*, any Wong Kar-Wai. What has David Lynch been up to?

LEAST LOOKING FORWARD TO: And what about the Coen Brothers? What's next for them?



***Butterfly* setting a low bar for '04**

Originally published January 29, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



DELORIAN PUBLISHING: When Ashton reads his book, he goes back in time. When other people look at it, they just think he's a bad actor.

C

oming fresh off of one of history's worst years for movies, you can't help but hope for better fare for 2004. Leaving the sold-out screening of *The Butterfly Effect* that I attended this weekend, however, I experienced a sickening sense of *déjà vu*.

True, *The Butterfly Effect* is only one movie. But *Gigli* was only one movie too, and it's alarming to have to report that already in January its near equivalent is playing at a theater near you.

The plot is one of those suffocating changing-the-past-changes-the-present affairs that in film finds its genesis in Chris Marker's 1962 *La jetée*, remade in 1995 as *Twelve Monkeys*. The original is remarkable for a number of reasons, but I admit that Terry Gilliam's remake stumped me, and that my friend Bill, who loved it, has long since given up trying to explain it to me. I know I *could* get it, but the truth is that the central conceit wearies me so much that I don't much care.

Twelve Monkeys had other things, such as... oh... performances, to offer anyway. *The Butterfly Effect* is so enervated and unimaginative that it makes the other film look like *Citizen Kane* in comparison. A synopsis I ran across online captures not just the complexity of the plot but also the intellectual timbre of the film perfectly:

Evan (Kutcher) mourns over his girlfriend's death while recollecting his childhood memories of

his blackouts. But in the process discovers that he has the ability to go back in time and alter the past. But everytime he changes something, it goes wrong. Which, on a personal note, makes the tagline work well. "Change one thing. Change everything."

It's quite a surprising thing, I would imagine, to discover that one has the ability to go back in time, almost unusual enough to require an explanation within the film.

Eric Bress and J. Mackye Gruber, who wrote and co-directed the film, see it differently; their Evan (played, as indicated above, by Ashton Kucher) instead loses consciousness at key moments in the proceedings, awakening later without a memory of what happened. The events are nevertheless recorded in a journal he keeps; later, should he wish to, he can go back in time to these precise moments simply by reading the journal entry.

If that seems unsatisfying in audience terms, consider too the fact that the film's central events are told subjectively from Evan's point of view. In other words, any time something of dramatic import is about to occur, Evan blacks out and we, like him, only find out what happened later. Imagine a *Titanic* in which the ship is not shown sinking and you just about have it.

The point of all of this time-traveling is for Evan to change the past to prevent the death of his girlfriend Kayleigh (Amy Smart), who really is scripted more like a childhood sweetheart on whom the adult Evan is nurturing a crush.

Evan's many attempts to correct the past result in some unintentionally hilarious futures: one ostensibly happy conclusion portrays Evan and Kayleigh as preppy campus Greeks who seem far too wholesome ever to have allowed a single drop of hard drink to pass their lips; another, so tasteless that the audience actually laughed, shows Evan as a quadruple amputee whom Kayleigh sweetly cares for while dating another of their childhood friends. In this instance it was Evan's heroism that cost him his limbs; Kayleigh still loves him but prefers men with legs.

In a story making the rounds on websites and entertainment shows, Kucher attended an audition recently in which Cameron Crowe, director of *Almost Famous*, was so nonplussed by his performance that he suggested Kucher take acting lessons. Kucher has a natural presence and good looks, but his TV and screen persona is powered by a fraudulent hipness that's embarrassing, and it's that artificial presence on which all of his performances are built.

In *The Butterfly Effect* the actor who mourns his girlfriend's death isn't Ashton Kucher but rather Ashton Kucher's self-conscious conception of the flippy, street smart smartass Ashton Kucher wants to be. Piling another layer of artifice — the mourning boyfriend — on top of that is far more than the structure can bear. I single him out for this abuse not out of meanness, but rather because I fear that what likeability and presence he does have will go wasted so long as he cultivates this fake nonchalance. And certainly dating Demi Moore, the single most conniving actor at work in films, can't help.

But the blame for *The Butterfly Effect* is far from Kucher's alone. Directors Bress and Gruber (the two wrote last year's *Final Destination 2*) exhibit no natural storytelling ability. This would be a liability in any film, but here, where the narrative is necessarily disjointed and calls for multiple

permutations, it's a certain cause of death.

The world the two create for *The Butterfly Effect* is an unbelievable one because nothing in it comes naturally: we're unsure of its whereabouts, we're not told where major characters are for long stretches of real time or how they've been filling it, their relationships — or lack of them — are perpetually unclear.

And in a film where time is a major theme, the passage of screen time is itself a source of constant bafflement. In one sequence, for instance, Evan's mother announces plans to sell the house and the family is seen moving on what seems to be the next day. In another a house is bombed and some of its occupants killed. Evan, who played a role in the bombing, escapes into a forest, where he blacks out, awakening in a hospital. Later he's taken to a hypnotist who hopes to fill in the blanks in his memory. If *my* memory serves (because I admit that bad movies can sometimes fly from my memory almost as soon as the lights come up) the police are even brought in to question him. It feels as though a week or so has passed, but, to my surprise, we later learn that the entire episode, from bomb to bedtime, took place in a single day.

And meanwhile, to my amazement and dismay, *The Butterfly Effect* is the top draw at the box office this week nationwide. I'm at a virtual loss to explain why, but then again this week will also see my forty-second birthday, a fact that places me far outside Hollywood's target demographic. In my day *Back to the Future* was the time-travel movie raking it in and, for the record, I've always really loved that film. Call me old-fashioned (or just old), but my advice is to rent that one instead.



Unique *Cooler* is smart, ironic and detailed

Originally published January 22, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)



GAME FACES ON: Maria Bello, Alec Baldwin and William H. Macy team up for a slew of accolades in the critically-praised *The Cooler*.

I

n the new film *The Cooler*, William H. Macy plays a luckless bastard named Bernie Lootz whose job it is to cool the winning streaks of gamblers at the Las Vegas casino where he's employed. His luck is so rotten that he manages this feat simply by being in the company of these winners or by offering them a drink, and his ability is so infallible that the ruthless casino boss Shelly (Alec Baldwin) doesn't think that he can afford to let him go.

Lootz thinks otherwise; the film opens a week before his expected departure date, and his plan is to move somewhere where he can see daylight, clocks, and windowed interiors. In a characteristically shrewd detail, this casino is called the Golden Shangri-La, and like its 1937 counterpart (from the Frank Capra film *Lost Horizon*), this Shangri-La is a place that you leave at your own peril.

Into Lootz's life comes an attractive casino waitress named Natalie (Maria Bello); she wants Lootz to stay on at the casino, and she's made astrological charts that prove her plan is the right one. But love changes Lootz's luck — he starts winning, and those around him do too. And when Lootz's adult son rematerializes in his life with a pregnant girlfriend in tow, the stage is set for some heavy Vegas melodrama.

The Cooler is the third film by writer/director Wayne Kramer and it's set apart from the rest of the slop in theaters now by its unique ironic tone and its unfailing sense of detail. Everything about *The Cooler* is smart: Kramer and co-writer Frank Hannah anticipate our questions and disbelief almost before we become aware of them ourselves, and their answers to our objections

(such as why this attractive woman would take up with our loser hero) come as pleasant surprises, not least because they're addressed at all.

How smart are the details? When we're introduced to a third-string Sinatra named Buddy Stafford (Paul Sorvino, in a wonderful small performance), he's performing "You're Getting to Be a Habit with Me" in the casino night club; in the following scene, we discover that he's a junky. Lootz's luck can be charted by the health of the house plants he keeps in the seedy motel room he calls home. And in a really wonderful piece of visual humor, Lootz stops by an EZ Market; as he leaves his car, the "et" fizzles out on the store's neon sign, and the words "EZ Mark" appear beside him in reverse on his windshield.

The Las Vegas Kramer portrays in *The Cooler* is one that's derived from Scorsese — there are entire subplots borrowed from that director's *Casino* — but the wonderful, queasy mixture of violence and humor is Kramer's own. The film tells you that what's going on is serious business (and as Shelly becomes more and more unscrupulous in his plans to make Lootz stay, it is), but there's a comic undercurrent bubbling just beneath the surface that's both disorienting and irresistible — it's like having your kneecaps shattered by thugs who then tell you good-naturedly that they're only bullshitting and offer you the world.

In this quality, the picture is abetted inestimably by Alec Baldwin, whose Shelly is a viper with a human side that's always just out of reach. He's marvelous here to the extent that it's hard to connect this actor with the callow leading man of a film such as *State & Main*. Baldwin has hinted at these depths before but in *The Cooler* you can watch him come into his own. Maria Bello likewise surprises, even given her good work in *Auto Focus*; she moves from solid support to lead actress in the space of this one film. And the supporting cast is all aces.

The Cooler has its flaws. It's a little cluttered with subplots, and it banks on good humor to extricate the plot from more than one quandary. It's a touch heavier than it needs to be. But these are small complaints. Kramer shows a real talent here, and it's a unique talent, too. *The Cooler* isn't all he has in store for us, but it's a firm stride in the right direction.



***LOTR: ROTK* is as over-long as its name**

Originally published January 15, 2004

by [Jake Euker](#)

T

he length of *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* starts in the title. It's a liability that doesn't get brought up a lot; it's as if the film were overweight or handicapped in some way, and it thus would be a little rude to mention it. The fact is that *The Return of the King* is not just factually, but also dramatically, overlong, an observation you can't make about, say, *Spartacus*. The

potential length of a Tolkein adaptation is something to be guarded against, but by the time this third film opened the reviews for the first two overlong installments were so positive — and the boxoffice so awesome — that you begin to wonder if length wasn't actually courted. Here it's no virtue.

Is it possible to write a spoiler for this film? I'll limit myself to saying that the film drives off the road about 40 minutes before the end credits and never finds its way back. Endings arrive in waves: Frodo awakens post-adventure in a bed at the foot of which Gandalf stands laughing as most of the film's characters are brought in to greet heroic Frodo one by one; there's a return to the Shire (Frodo's homeland) that cloys; and the actual conclusion can only be described as a staring contest in which hobbits, wizards and so on exchange poignant, long glances before a portion of them board an enchanted ship and sail away.

These endings are an indulgence that director Peter Jackson allows himself, as are earlier scenes such as an extended battle with a monstrous spider that's inefficiently handled in filmmaking terms, material about the forging of a sword that bears little weight plot-wise, most of Liv Tyler's material, Pippin's encounter with a crystal ball, a horseshit speech about death delivered by Gandalf that surely embarrassed Ian McKellen, the gifted performer who had to deliver it. By contrast, it's hard to think of material in *Lawrence of Arabia* that a viewer might wish away, despite a comparable running time. (The intermission in the latter film no doubt helped.)

Elsewhere there's much to enjoy in *Return of the King*, and before it hit gravel I enjoyed much of what I saw. For a lot of people, *Return of the King* will be a seminal event in their movie-going lives, their first realization of how broad a canvas film can paint, of how deeply it can entrench you into another, impossible world. Understandably, their reactions will be very strong and likely very positive, and there's no fault in that. When I say that I enjoyed much of it, I understand that a comparable devotion — the ability to give oneself completely over to a new experience — probably isn't available to me. (I call it a "seasoned" rather than a "jaded" response, but you can choose either.) But part of the fault lies with the film, too: it's not that good.

And so, as I said, I enjoyed, rather than was elated by, a lot of the film. The battle scenes in particular were compelling and well-handled; the geography of the film, so important to its credibility and comprehension, was lucidly laid forth; its towering verticals were heart-stoppingly real. Many of its images stay with you, such as a burning wooden head breaching a barricaded fortress or the vertiginous stony path up a mountainside that our heroes are obliged to scale.

The performances, on the other hand, are a mixed bag. Tolkein readers will recall how great a presence the ring was in the final chapters and how much Frodo, who was to destroy it by hurling it into the molten ore from which it was forged (a fact strangely unmentioned in the film), struggles to resist its narcotic pull. The power of the ring is alluded to in the film, but, as Frodo, we don't see Elijah Wood struggling much with it (he stares a lot instead), and it's hard to decide if Jackson didn't emphasize the ring's power enough or if Wood is that rare Hollywood star who has never had an addiction problem and thus didn't know how to play the role.

The one struggling, instead, is Sean Astin, who plays Frodo's trusty sidekick Sam. His accent drifts, his movement is unsure, and he fights to hold the camera. Elsewhere Cate Blanchett appears momentarily, Viggo Mortensen (as Aragorn) behaves nobly, acting more from the chest

than the heart, and Billy Boyd (Pippin) gets in some good turns. After his likable performance in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, it's a drag to see Orlando Bloom reduced again to the characterless elf Legolas Greenleaf.

It's interesting too to note that in Tolkein's original Middle Earth political allegory abounded, the French clearly cast as the elves; here they're a far less enchanting breed than what Tolkein presented, more like the kind of creature who might dryly deny you the use of their air space to bomb Mordor. The dwarves were intended to represent the Germanic countries, and John Rhys-Davies, as Gimli, dies beneath ridiculous make-up and a costume that's like a satire on *liederhosen*.

The Lord of the Ring cycle is a true screen epic, commendable overall. I'm made nervous, though, by its critical acclaim, particularly when it falls on the director. When we talk in the future about Peter Jackson's directorial style, what exactly will we be talking about? The ability to juggle a production this size is in itself a feat, but what does he bring to it as its director? An epic by David Lean or Kurosawa is instantly recognizable, not just for its professionalism (which the *Ring* films have in spades), but also for the character that their directors bring to them. Jackson's past comedies have been hit-or-miss, and his *Heavenly Creatures*, while interesting, is made in a style we could no longer recognize as his. Now, working on these epics, he's made big movies in small movie style: they're unpaced, they're edited in a cliffhanger style more appropriate to a smaller range, and they're packed with activity but somehow lacking scope. He makes use of the effects he's given (unlike someone like James Cameron, who fussily insists on detail that never reaches the screen) and he keeps things hanging together. But watching *The Return of the King*, you never feel his joy or his vision. The film is a product rather than a passion, sold by an animated Gollum.

You can understand the fascination *The Return of the King* holds for its legions of fans. But is the Academy going to be giving a best director Oscar to the man who made *Meet the Feebles*?



Family fun leaves out fun parts

Originally published December 4, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



THE CAT WHO STOLE CHRISTMAS: Mike Myers, in 100 lbs. of cat suit, is the frantic core of a frantic *The Cat in the Hat*.



BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE: Eddie Murphy, now rated PG for some strong language, does his part in destroying Mansion.

T

he protagonists of the two big new family releases, *The Haunted Mansion* and *The Cat in the Hat*, are real estate agents.

In the first case it's Eddie Murphy, playing a phony who wears a perpetual, embarrassing grin across his face; he's a workaholic who interrupts a family trip to take a look at the title mansion, and who thus embroils his family in an ancient curse played out in an environment based upon the Disney ride that inspired the film. In the second it's Kelly Preston, a single mom, whose boss at the Humberflood Real Estate Agency is a monster and whose suitor (Alec Baldwin) is a loser who has plans to send her young son away to military school, marry her, and then take off for good the girdle that holds in his beer gut.

My understanding is that *The Haunted Mansion* has been receiving the withering reviews it deserves while *The Cat in the Hat* gets points from critics and audiences for the "freshness" of its humor. I don't like always being the asshole, but both these features look less like movies and more like properties to me. And if you'll settle for either, I have some land in Florida I'd like for you to see . . .

In *The Haunted Mansion*, the problem is pretty obvious, and it's its star. Eddie Murphy, fresh from a string of wearily bad performances in really horrible features, pulls *The Haunted Mansion* down around him with record-breaking speed. If it seems unfair to single out this one flaw in a movie redolent with flubbed scenes, unfunny jokes and catastrophic overproduction, consider his co-stars. Why should a terrific actor like Terence Stamp, cast here as the evil butler Ramsley, or Jennifer Tilly, who manages to create some interest as the disembodied head of a gypsy in a crystal ball, be swamped along with the production because a coasting superstar can't bother to give a performance? You can argue that maybe he just wants to work; but the question then becomes *How much money does he need?* and, *Does showing up on the set qualify as "working"?*

Here, where he's needed to anchor the film and give it a comic center, Murphy is intolerable. His shit-eating come-on isn't just a performance he gives to his potential real estate buyers, it's his performance *period*. Spending time in his company during *The Haunted Mansion* is like hanging out with one of those goons who does his own TV commercials for liquidation sales at used car lots: it's not funny — it's crass and relentless, and it recurs during the film with the inevitability of those same commercials.

The director, Rob Minkoff, was likely helpless in the face of it. How can he tell Eddie Murphy that he's ruining his big film?

No film could survive the void that Murphy creates at the center of *The Haunted Mansion*.

What's on sale in *The Cat in the Hat* is a different kind of emptiness, a free-for-all, postmodern pastiche that, compared to the somnambulism of *The Haunted Mansion*, feels like a seizure. *The Cat in the Hat* is much better, but it's just as crass in its own way. It distracts rather than entertains.

The film uses the Dr. Seuss children's book as a taking-off point. I would have been more comfortable with original material if only because everyone wouldn't have had to try so damn hard. (A wonderful film such as *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* creates a similar the-world-is-a-playground dreamscape without the burden of a beloved original.)

The Cat in the Hat roughly follows the plot of the book, and the art direction mirrors the artist's lunar-landscape weirdness. What's missing is the charming, bewildering feel for language that brought Suess's books so much to life. It's hard to think of a solution (shouldn't it have rhymed?), but what screenwriters Alec Berg, David Mandel and Jeff Schaffer settle on is a hyper, rapid-fire barrage of language and sketches, augmented by director Bo Welch with an embarrassment of visual riches. (They settle the rhyme issue early on by having the Cat explain that he's no good at it.) So it is that scarcely a minute passes by that isn't crammed with material; it's ambitious and often funny, but it's a kind of franticness that keeps it alive.

It's also hip in a way that's beginning to tire.

"Family" films have for some time been prone to a kind of stylish cynicism in their humor that is meant to appeal to the adults who bring their kids (and if *Rugrats* and their ilk are any indication, filmmakers are pitching a similar, watery cynicism to the kids, too). We expect it now in a lot of family films, and when it works, as it does in *Finding Nemo* and *Pirates of the Caribbean*, it does so by sliding past without much effort.

In *The Cat in the Hat* the hipness plays self-consciously; even when it's funny, as in a clip of one of those fistfights into which the Taiwanese parliament seems constantly to be deteriorating, it's labored and smug. (In this case I suspect that the babysitter, Mrs. Kwan [Amy Hill] is portrayed as Taiwanese solely for the sake of that joke.)

Reading this, it may sound as though I'm splitting hairs, but within the frenzied context of the film, the effort shows. And effort, whether you're conscious of it or not, is the bane of comedy. (As are fart jokes, of which there are several too many here.)

While we're on the subject of effort, Mike Myers plays the Cat. He, like all others involved, is working very hard, and his Cat is a catchall of comedic bits that, when settled, seems to have a Jewish vaudeville comic as its core.

His task is a bitch: he's working under a ton of makeup and he's hoping to render a character known, but imagined differently, to all. While he's working his ass off, Alec Baldwin, as the suitor, and a young actress named Dakota Fanning, as Sally, steal a lot of scenes.

Thing One and Thing Two, the Cat's wiggy, diabolical helpers, are together played by a total of five different actors; while watching, I couldn't really tell whether there were any humans, beyond maybe programmers, involved in these parts at all. These Things are very, very creepy, half Teletubby and half Aphex Twin. They scared one little girl I attended the movie with, and, although I knew better than to tell her, they scared her fake uncle Jake, too.

And although we had a few laughs at the movie, the hectic free association wore the kids out, and I know for a fact that it left the grown-up resentful. It was an improvement on *The Haunted Mansion* — they never would have survived the tedium offered there. Leaving the theater a

debate ensued between the girls: which movie was McDonald's promoting in its Happy Meals?

And I suddenly had an object lesson on my hands about Hollywood generosity: *The Cat and the Hat* and *The Haunted Mansion*, two jaded confections, were nos. 1 and 2 at the box office that week. The studios offer them up as early holiday gifts, but as early holiday gifts for *themselves*.



Gothika neither Goth nor good

Originally published November 27, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



SHOULDN'T THAT BE "REDRUM"?: *Gothika* director Mathieu Kassovitz didn't bother with all that fancy creativity stuff; he just borrows everything from other, better films.

T

he irrelevantly titled *Gothika* is a near exact cross of *The Ring* and *Girl, Interrupted*, which is to say that it's a horror film, built like a video game in which clues are dropped for our heroine, set nearly entirely within a bleak mental institution for women. If that sounds good to you, by all means, go. But if you don't care to leave your "entertainments" totally demoralized, hopeless and

downtrodden, you may want to drop in on almost any other film instead.

Dr. Meredith Grey (played by Halle Berry) begins the film as a happily married, conscientious doctor at the institution, but before a day in her life has passed on-screen she's lost her husband and her job and finds herself detained within the very walls where she practiced, accused of her husband's horrific murder and unable to remember much of what went on before. I wish to note that it became clear to me at this point who the real villain of the movie was, but the rest of the audience and I waited with Dr. Grey in the dismal, dimly-lit institution for the remaining hour to have our suspicions verified.

How dimly lit is this prison? When one of the orderlies notes at one point that they're experiencing generator problems, two or three of us in the audience laughed, unable to discern much difference between the properly lighted facility and the pitch-dark one. Storms rage outside this fenced, stone building, which is set atop a hill and approached by a winding road, and inside the fluorescent lights, where provided, buzz on and off like a David Lynch interior seen in fast forward. Perhaps that's where the title comes from.

The one genuine scare, in fact, is a borrowing of a favorite Lynch technique wherein he films actors moving backwards (such as the dwarf in the *Twin Peaks* series) and then runs the film backwards to provide a jerky, unnatural forward motion. Lynch builds menace, but *Gothika* director Mathieu Kassovitz, just piles on atmosphere and effects, borrows plot points from other, better films, and hopes for the best. Even the score, by John Ottman, is most successful when it appropriates string crescendos from *The Shining*.

Berry screams throughout when she ought to be talking to her lawyer, and she's followed by the ghost of a young woman (Kathleen Mackey) who screams back at her.

Robert Downey, Jr., cast here as a heterosexual, is given the hopeless role of Berry's colleague-cum-doctor (the phrase "conflict of interest" goes unused); Downey seems to know what he's up against and he gives up the ghost early on. You can watch his performance die. At one point he does a search for a certain tattoo on the Internet and thus mysteriously identifies the killer.

Penelope Cruz plays an inmate who victimizes and then ultimately helps our heroine, and she's given a little material, which she breathes some life into.

Meanwhile those few of us in attendance at the matinee braced ourselves against gratuitous shocks (as at some John Carpenter films, I was afraid to eat the sucker I had with me, fearing I would bite off my tongue when a cat was propelled from an opened cabinet) and awaited the obvious, which was a long time coming.

And a note to Goths, whom this movie hopes to deprive of their funds: it's not what it says it is. Save your cash for Kirby's next Monday and cut your losses.



Master serves well

Originally published November 20, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



ROYAL PERFORMANCE: Russell Crowe, on board for more Oscar attention, helps *Master and Commander* stay well afloat.

G

iven the briskness with which its two and a half hours sail by, its well-intentioned cast, its deft handling of plot (two of Patrick O'Brian's acclaimed, lengthy, sea-going novels are condensed into this single film), and its plausible, even-handed script, one might imagine that *Master and Commander* might have inspired some sort of reaction in me.

It didn't so much. It's a well-made sea adventure; I enjoyed it, and leaving the theater I forgot it. In that sense, *Master and Commander* does its job and does it well.

I had expected worse. I'm not a fan of the director, Peter Weir, an Australian who burst on the scene with the mediocre horror comedy *The Cars that Ate Paris* in 1974 and went on to make the kind of middle-of-the-road think pictures that always grate a little: *Green Card*, *Dead Poets Society*, *Gallipoli*.

He took a five-year break in the mid-90s, returning with *The Truman Show*, a film in which a new, low-key professionalism emerged, and in *Master and Commander* he keeps his higher aspirations under wraps.

So it is that Russell Crowe, very good as the captain, and the budget carry the day. *Master and Commander* is an enjoyable genre piece. I'd like to offer you more, but, like many good genre pieces, it's already floated away.



Love Actually actually sucks

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by [Jake Euker](#)

P

laying Karen, a housewife and the sister of the Prime Minister in the new British comedy *Love Actually*, Emma Thompson learns of an indiscretion committed by her husband when she unwraps a Christmas gift in the presence of her family. The discovery hurts her so badly that you can feel her eyes sting; it's like she's been punched in the nose, but she can't show it in front of her children, and Thompson's struggle to maintain control is the work of an actor in absolute peak form. There are dozens of wonderful moments like this in the film, and the cast is packed with more good British actors than anything since *Gosford Park*. Yet I hated it so much that I thought I'd stop breathing. *Love Actually* is too rich; writer/director Richard Curtis piles on too much and extends scenes far too long. He reaches for gags he's already got. And its tone is tastefully humanist, its sensibility maudlin and skin-deep. In the end the film is just as winsome and sugary as its facile message: "love, actually, is all around."

It's also too big, and that's putting it charitably. The film tells the story of a couple of dozen Londoners whose lives are all interrelated very loosely, centering on an advertising firm headed by Harry (Alan Rickman); it's his wife Thompson plays, and in his employ we find Laura Linney, secretly in love with the firm's engineer. The firm also employs an office vixen who's set her sites on Rickman. The breakfast cart worker is frustrated at love and decides that in America his average looks, coupled with his English accent, would buy him more attention from women; his best friend works on a video shoot where a pair of porn extras meet for the first time while simulating copulation, eventually falling in love. Liam Neeson, a friend of Karen's, is mourning the death of his wife; his stepson, a young boy, has fallen in love with a girl at school who doesn't know he exists. Meanwhile a young couple has married; Linney's at the wedding, and she first notes the best man's seeming romantic interest in the groom and his coldness to the bride. Colin Firth is brought into the fray somehow, too; he finds his brother with his bombshell wife and leaves for France, where his Portugese housekeeper falls in love with him although the two don't share a language. Throw in an aging rock star who, together with the overweight manager who's devoted to him, is trying for a career comeback, and the Prime Minister, who finds the

office worker he's falling for in the embrace of the President of the United States, and you've just about got it.

Or do you? Curtis manages the Herculean task of keeping these plots and subplots straight and the characters recognizable, but why? The material here collapses its romantic comedy structure before the film is an hour old and even at 135 minutes the denouements of the myriad romances being undertaken are necessarily rushed. The film's methods are manipulative; the action, for example, takes place in the five weeks before Christmas, with a kind of wrap-up on Christmas Eve, and we see a lot of gifted actors humiliated by unplayable finishes designed to rend our hearts. (Worst among these is Bill Nighy's wonderful Billy Mack, the rock star, who is called upon to make one of the most embarrassing declarations of love in recent memory, and that on the heels of a marvelously imaginative comic performance. Your heart bleeds, all right, but it's out of sympathy for the performer, not on behalf of the character. Emma Thompson is sabotaged to the extent that she has to take her children home from the school Christmas play, heartbroken but brave, and spouting lines such as, "Come on! I've got some treats at home.") The artificial Christmas Eve framing device provokes such exigencies as the boy's childhood sweetheart returning to live in America *that night*, Firth chartering a last-minute Christmas Eve plane to France and finding his beloved working in a restaurant, and the Prime Minister (in a familiar performance from Hugh Grant), finding himself alone, searching every house on a long street until he finds his girl, who herself is just leaving for the Christmas concert at which Thompson is bravely holding court.

These are TV wrap-ups; *Love Actually* plays like a *Dawson's Creek* Christmas special in which decent, comically lovable characters find the miracle of love in their lives at the eleventh hour. Stateside, it's James L. Brooks, perpetrator of *Terms of Endearment* and *As Good as It Gets*, who makes this kind of skin-deep, sitcom-derived film (Brooks worked extensively in television before inflicting his art on the big screen). Curtis, who directs here for the first time, has always walked very close to that line -- he wrote *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Four Weddings and a Funeral* — but directing his own material for the first time, he crosses it with both feet.

Love Actually opens with a voiceover by Grant in which he talks about the ways in which love is everywhere. He says that when the attacks on the World Trade Center occurred, the calls coming from the planes weren't calls of revenge and hatred but calls to loved ones. Near the end of *Love Actually*, the young boy, at the encouragement of his father (Liam Neeson), jumps security at Heathrow and races down the concourse to tell his departing friend that he loves her, and the sequence (besides being nauseatingly saccharine) strangely echoes the opening monologue: don't we all understand that the airport will now be shut down on Christmas Eve, that a million travelers will miss their families because of what the boy has done? It doesn't happen in the film; the film's message is that love is bigger than all that, and so the issue is never addressed. If you can accept that, you might enjoy the film. I watched in a fury; but then I was already so bloated by all the good will and so anxious for each little romance to wind down that I would have accepted, as a conclusion, a nuclear blast.

But Nigel, the frustrated breakfast cart worker, may have a point, and it could be that the exquisite Britishness of all the undertakings in *Love Actually* will blind some viewers to its prime-time banality, to the way the film reduces all its characters — from the little boy to the rock star to the Prime Minister — to awkward-at-love carbon copies of one another. *Love*

Actually opens in a recording studio, just as *Nashville* — another film with dozens of characters and a similar loose plot — did. *Nashville* was an epic vision, huge and sprawling, with a sensibility far, far from the TV's small screen. If I ever find out what I suspect — that Curtis intended this scene as an homage to *Nashville*, that he hoped to indicate that the proceedings in his film somehow echoed those of the other — I vow to gun him down.

And I offer the following very Scrooge-like postscript: in all two hours plus of this warm, home-and-hearth, humanist effort, set during the holidays, and with its unquestioning acceptance of gays and minorities, the word "Hannukah" goes unused. I know that educated Brits are unhappy with the United States right now; the film addresses it, and I understand why. Is there anything else I need to know?



Matrix crashes in third installment

Originally published November 13, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



HE ALSO PLAYED SIDDHARTHA: It's going to take more than a neo-Christian saviour to beat down the plot eruptions in the Wachowskis' bloated, final Matrix installment.

B

esides my work for *F5*, I write for a website called filmcritic.com. There, it was my editor who got the unlucky task of reviewing *The Matrix Revolutions*; he didn't like it much, and he's been forwarding the resulting hate mail to the rest of us for the past week. I report with trepidation that I didn't much like it either. My response to the film's fans, in advance, is that there's no right answer as to whether a film is good or bad. We're all "right." Call me unenlightened; I accept it.

Just save the postage and/or electricity.

Also, I'm going to get things wrong. *Mea culpa*, because I admit that the Wachowski philosophy got away from me. It's not that it's too deep, I hope, but rather that I can't remember what's what from film to film, and I mention this because unlike last summer's *The Matrix Reloaded*, not keeping up on your *Matrix* lore may seriously hamper your comprehension and enjoyment of the newer film. I admit, for example, that I don't quite understand where Zion is, physically, except that it's somewhere underground. If that disqualifies me as a critic, so be it, but I sense that in general terms I'm not entirely alone. Surely many of us struggle to keep up?

The *Matrix* films certainly have their virtues. Their innovative approach to action, rapidly clichéd in lesser films, is still thrilling in the hands of the brothers. The films are inclusive without being tedious about it, and they've provided some fun roles for women. They're smart. And the first film deserves a special award for its best-ever use of the Led Zeppelin song "Kashmir."

What drags in the films is their 10-cent philosophical bent. (Or do I mean "theological"? The neo-Christian mythmaking can be pretty hard to take, although the seriousness with which it's approached by some viewers does provide some insight into how the whole Christ ball got rolling in the first place.) What began as more or less a surprise ending in the first film has now developed into an intricate set of rules that govern the action, and that claim to address such fundamental philosophical issues as the question of free will, to boot. Watching *Revolutions* with a friend, there was a puzzling moment when some assailants in the hire of Merovingian walk and stand on a ceiling; we were both willing to accept that they could, but couldn't remember *why* they could.

Dogma and exposition dominate *Revolutions*, and it's a bummer. (Isn't it also a miscalculation? How many of us are at the movies to see both a slow-motion gun battle *and* a discussion of pre-determinism?)

The new film is made up of set pieces separated by long passages of talk, and the schematic, were it laid out, would be a lesson in the evils of plot for the sake of plot.

More damning is the excess of the set pieces once they arrive.

The battle for the dock of Zion, for instance, is compelling, I suppose, but so long and so grievously over-produced that I couldn't wait for it to end. (It's also baffling in its transparent logical shortcomings.)

I liked *Reloaded* very much, and I found some of what I had enjoyed in that film in *Revolutions*: marvelous art direction within the Matrix (or our world, for neophytes), some supporting performances (Mary Alice's, who replaces the late Gloria Foster as the Oracle; Hugo Weaving's as Agent Smith; Monica Bellucci's as the jealous Persephone), and the many leafy touches that a budget this size in talented hands can provide.

But I found much, much more of what I *disliked* about the second film: the plot, the dire art direction outside the Matrix, the horrifying excess that a budget this size in any hands perhaps guarantees. In the end, I found that I was enjoying very little of *Revolutions*.

The Wachowskis have changed the face of action films for the time being with their *Matrix* trilogy, and I grant them that. But watching this bloated final installment it was hard for me to remember why.



Guerin is simply too glossy

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by [Jake Euker](#)



HEROINE ANYONE?: The real-life Veronica Guerin was killed in 1996 after her journalistic crusade against Dublin heroin dealers hit too close to home. The 2003 movie kills her all over again.

T

he new Cate Blanchett vehicle *Veronica Guerin* has its virtues, but they're the kind you can buy and, with Jerry Bruckheimer producing, cost is not an obstacle. What he's purchased is a handsome production (the kind of handsomeness wherein even the strip joints and flophouses are rendered in a tasteful, earth-toned variation of the street aesthetic) with slick camera action and first-rate actors in the supporting cast.

Veronica Guerin means to be a prestige production, but it's really a construction of the usual clichés and shallow high-mindedness to which the gloss has been heavily applied.

The film is based on the life of a Dublin journalist who was murdered in 1996, at the age of 38, after writing a crusading series of articles in the *Sunday Independent* in which she sought to

identify the drug barons who were at work in this depressed city.

Screenwriters Carol Doyle and Mary Agnes Donoghue present Guerin as an uncomplicated heroine whose sole motive is righteousness, and director Joel Schumacher, who can be counted on to take the path of least resistance, complies. The film is thus a black-and-white morality tale in which complexity is eschewed; we're shown early on a pair of toddlers toying with discarded needles in the street, and Guerin's justification is unquestioningly supplied.

In this film a drug kingpin is not shown downing a pint in a seedy pub — he's shown betting it all at a gaming table with a trophy mistress on his arm. In case the contrast of his high-rolling lifestyle to that of his customers, who nod out in concrete stairwells, is not enough, the filmmakers supply us with a follow-up scene in which the mistress is lying beaten on the floor of his bedroom the following morning.

The clichés Doyle and Donoghue supply are killing, and Schumacher is simply not an intelligent enough filmmaker to soften the blow. When Guerin puts her young son to bed, she remarks that he'll sleep well, and her husband is there to note that it's because she wore him out on the football pitch. She's written to be perky and irresistible, but also infallibly decent, and thus dissatisfied with writing fluff for the *Independent*; but in the tradition of every woman-crusader film, she begins writing about the heroin epidemic in her city only over the objections of her husband, her editor, the police, her informers, a Parliament member, and, of course, the criminals themselves. Nothing can stop her, of course; that's a given, too.

As Guerin, Cate Blanchett seems to have had a deeper conception of her character than her screenwriters, and there's a strange tension in the film as a result. Blanchett hints at a deeper motive in Guerin, perhaps fame or self-destructiveness or vanity, and she takes the risk of making Guerin sometimes too arch or self-satisfied. She shows us a stupidly hazardous side to her, and she does so apparently without her director's full understanding of it.

When Guerin quips, "Can I quote you?" to a criminal who has just threatened her life, Blanchett raises her eyebrows to convey a false sassiness; it shows us a self-satisfaction in this woman that is grasping and unscripted, and the nuance stands out in the film as forcefully as if she had farted. Blanchett perhaps would have been a better director than Schumacher — she certainly envisions a more complex central figure — but then many, many others would have, too. She fits in better as the film goes along — the revelation that the *Independent* is, apparently, a little bit of a yellow newspaper helps to place Guerin's position in society — but the actress never seems to be quite in step with the director just the same. Her performance doesn't *stand* out so much as *stick* out; it's undeniably interesting, but it's in the wrong film.

After Guerin's murder, the film ends again and again as the news is broken to her enemies and loved ones, and the fates of the criminals she identified are given in voice-over. Still later come the rundown of the laws that were passed as a result of her assassination and finally the title cards that give statistics about the drop in violent crime we're asked to attribute to her (and undoubtedly her work affected these). One of the victories Guerin's work and death achieved was that a week after she was killed, the Irish constitution was amended to allow for the confiscation of assets of those who are suspected of drug trafficking.

A better screenplay would have addressed this "victory" more questioningly: Are constitutional

amendments produced by emotional outcry desirable, or should they be evaluated at a calmer distance? What are the rights of suspects in Ireland? Is it just that someone lose his home for a *suspected* crime? Guerin herself identifies two drug barons during the course of the film who turn out to be innocent of trafficking drugs.

But *Veronica Guerin* is not a film of much sophistication or complexity. Despite its careful production and its seeming intelligence, it is, like our own "war on drugs," unwelcoming of your skepticism.



***Bat Boy* full of talent and humor**

Originally published October 23, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)

S

tage One has converted the Mary Jane Teall Theatre at Century II into a suitably ghoulish venue, given our proximity to Halloween, for their production of the off-Broadway hit *Bat Boy*. This very funny musical comedy — by Keythe Farley and Brian Flemming, music by Laurence O'Keefe — is culled from a headline in the *Weekly World News*: *Bat Boy Found in Cave*. (Its headline this week, I happened to notice, announces the gay marriage of Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden.)

>SEE IT

What *Bat Boy*, *The Musical*

Where: Mary Jane Teall Theater @
Century II

When: Thursdays, Fridays and
Saturdays, 8 p.m. and Sundays
2 p.m. Through Nov. 2

How much: \$15 - \$30 with
discounts for groups, students and
seniors

Bat Boy tells the story of this outsider's adoption by a wholesome family with a daughter just about Bat Boy's age, and about the ways their community (Hope Falls, West Virginia) reject, and then ultimately embrace, him. Think *Edward Scissorhands*.

In her curtain speech, Kathy Page-Hauptman told those in attendance that as well as being a good time, *Bat Boy* has a valuable message for us about tolerance. What she didn't let on is that the writers take this message — which has served as the subject of every Hollywood movie made in the last 15 years in which a teenager is present — about as seriously as the creators of *South Park*. (One of the writers, in fact, is voice director for *Rugrats*.) Thus is it that *Bat Boy* is mocking rather than pious, thank god, and you don't have to leave it feeling chastened.

Equity talent dominates the stage here, and you can see why the actors earn the extra bucks. In the lead role, Ryan Swearingen is a freaky marvel. Fresh from his cave, he waves and folds his hands like wings and lets out little squawks (I kept thinking of Leonardo DiCaprio in *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*). Later, thanks to some BBC language tapes, he transforms overnight into something like Professor Henry Higgins, except that he's visibly mimicking what he hears and is prone to regressing into battiness when under stress.

Philip Hoffman plays Dr. Parker, the head of the family into which Bat Boy is introduced, and his dance and physical comedy are a joy to watch. His steps are reticent, lending a ridiculous melodrama to the part. As daughter Shelley (I don't know if the extra "e" is an homage to Shelley Winters or the author of *Frankenstein*), Ellie Mooney simply shines.

The local talent holds its own, too. The townspeople of Hope Falls include Ted Woodward, Brent Moon, Aisha Henry, Nathan Wesselowski and Trisha Garnes — fine and versatile comedians all. Arthur W. Marks — way, way over the top as a revivalist preacher, the mother of several victims, and a guy named Roy — plays to the balconies, and he largely gets away with it, too.

The audience response — lots of laughter — is testimony to the skill director Suann Pollock brings to the production. Now based in Ohio, Pollock is a former WSU student (a fact strangely absent from the program). Laura Bergquist is musical director, and Sean Roberson, Tommy Mittlestadt, and Jackie Donahue work their usual magic in light design, properties, and stage management, respectively. Christy Railsback's costume design gets a few laughs in itself — a ghastly, Dracula-derived suit for Bat Boy comes to mind. Larry Jones does sound design, and J. Branson's utilitarian sets place the action squarely between *Little House on the Prairie* and *Last House on the Left*.

My only complaints are small ones. I would have liked to see the townspeople, who appear in many varied roles (varied to the point that the gangsta boyfriend of the daughter also appears as a church-going, middle-aged woman), interacting more among themselves, as they do in *The Robber Bridegroom*. The choreography (very wittily done overall by Jenna Tyrell) might have been cleaner at times, particularly in a really hilarious number in which Pan and the animals of the forest look on at Bat Boy's and Shelley's first tender embrace; I kept losing the lovers amid all the festivities. The humor is sometimes a wee bit broad.

And in one number, I feel an opportunity was lost. The song is "A Home for You," sung by Mrs. Parker to Bat Boy when she begins to envision bringing this freak into her family. It's far too cloying to stand, but here it's presented in a strangely straightforward manner. Mrs. Parker is wonderfully played by Barbara Schoenhofer — she's a deadpan, self-aware Doris Day, enlivening every scene she's in, and she can turn the simplest gesture into a comic bonanza — and anyone who's been to the theater in the last decade knows that she's capable of really curdling this icky milkshake of a song. I longed to see her do it, but it didn't happen. Did the

director hold her back, I wonder?

But, again, these are small complaints. *Bat Boy* was an ideal way to spend an October afternoon: it was spooky, witty, and a lot of fun. Take a date — preferably a full-fledged member of your own species — and go hang around.



Chainsaw not all it's cut out to be

Originally published October 23, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



AT LEAST SHE'S EMPOWERED: Gruesomeness and shock editing replace any sense of suspense in the beautiful-people remake of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

P

hysically, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is among the most painful movies I've ever seen. Power tools shriek on the Dolby-enhanced soundtrack at volumes — and pitches — that shatter the ear, shocks punctuate the narrative with heart-pounding frequency, the camera lurks within inches of screaming faces. Someone could lose an eye. And given director Marcus Nispel's love of

gruesome detail — severed hog heads, explicit injuries, jars of yellowish fluid in which organs float — the weak of stomach could lose their lunch as well.

Gruesomeness and shock editing are different things from suspense, of course. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* offers plenty of the first two but little of the latter. Like the original, it places its story in 1973 and, also like that film, it makes a half-hearted case that the events are based in fact. In its opening scenes — the best — a montage of headlines is presented with authentically antique-sounding narration, and we see amateurish footage of a policeman doing a walk-through of the crime scene. Later the things the policeman discovers are explained in pedestrian detail, but for a few minutes at the beginning there's some genuine dread.

What follows is the usual horror fodder, perhaps slightly more compelling here than in, say, *Darkness Falls*, if only because it appears to have been better-budgeted. It's a waste, but it sold out the showing I attended. A critic can't fight sensation; for many years now, filmmakers have been reaching for any response they can draw from an audience, and a part of the audience, nurtured on extreme amusement park rides, *Faces of Death* videos, *The Exorcist*, and Jolt cola, responds. Intelligence and creativity are beside the point for those who only want to experience *something* at the movies. And *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* gives them the chance to respond.

Tobe Hooper's 1974 original, of course, gave us all a chance, and the question that plagues many of us is why was it remade? Hooper's grubby masterpiece plugged into a universal, drive-in horror premise, and the director made A-plus decisions at every step. His film's low budget lent it authenticity and a populous, this-could-happen-here sensibility, and its snapshot of teenage boredom and casual vice was as real as real can be. (Because I may never again have the chance, I want to mention that this was not Hooper's only masterpiece. The wildly undervalued *Funhouse* (1981) provides the most realistic portrait of teen life in late-70s Mid-America that I, who lived through it, have ever seen. No "great" director can touch *Funhouse*'s derived-from-observation realism, from Spielberg and Scorsese on down.)

To remake *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* requires that the screenwriter Scott Kosar and director Nispel have something new to bring to it; they cannot hope to match the fluky terror of the original, as they must know. What they bring to it is production, sometimes successfully (as in the hazy languor of the landscape) and more often not. Whatever it is they envisioned for their film, it's not an imaginative updating: it has no spark, no central idea that would make it "new." It's a retread and, as such, you can't help but compare it to the original at every turn.

Has this gambit ever paid off? Gus Van Sant's frame-for-frame homage to *Psycho* wasn't terrible so much as pointless, and thus an offense committed against a great thriller. The sequels and remakes of *Carrie* hold themselves for comparison against an unbeatable original. George Romero's *Dead* films (*Night of the Living ...*, *Day of the ...*, *Dawn of the ...*), though not always to my taste, should be legally protected from exhumation and exploitation, for who could hope to recreate that maniac's single-mindedness? Directors with that driven madness (if there are some) should — and, if truly mad, like Sam Raimi, could — create original nightmares to haunt us for the ages.

Only Philip Kaufman pulled off the impossible, remaking 1954's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* in terms so original that the remake (1978) stands beside the original as a unique vision of the

unreal.

Kaufman succeeded in part by bringing *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* into the present day. Nispel sets his *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in its original timeframe, and most of the fun I had at the film was in spotting anachronisms, such as a "Shit Happens" bumper sticker and the use of the word "dude" when addressing friends and strangers. (By contrast, "man" is underused for 1973, and I never heard "chick," "Vietnam" or "trippy.")

Apparently only wardrobe was notified, but then again, the kids in this film could walk down the street today without drawing much attention, and their pants, I'm sorry to say, are not appropriately flared.

Speaking of which, a part of the legitimate terror of the original *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* was that we knew the victims — they were, or were just like, our friends and neighbors, the kids who hung out in the smoking area at the high school, the big brothers and sisters of our best friends.

The kids in the remake are models, and it makes a difference. Watching sexy Mike Vogel, as a man named Andy, get his leg sawn off and his body hung on a hook, I wasn't thinking, *He seems just like my cousin Eric*. I was thinking, *Maybe he'll take off his shirt*.

The difference is that, instead of being scared out of my wits, I was just trying to find a way to kill time.



This thriller is worth your time

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by [Jake Euker](#)



IT'S KILLER TIME: Denzel Washington races the clock to clear his name in the slick, satisfying thriller *Out of Time*.

T

he excellent new thriller *Out of Time* has been getting the kind of blandly positive reviews that would keep almost anyone away. Roger Ebert's is typical; he complains moronically about the plausibility of a few plot points and lets the thrill of a well-crafted, suspenseful picture get away.

The film, by Carl Franklin, is a partial reworking of 1947's *The Big Clock* in which a police chief in Banyan Key, Fla., finds himself the prime suspect in a double murder. As played by Denzel Washington, this cop is a likable, if not too scrupulous, guy; he has a married mistress, he still pines for the wife from whom he's estranged, and, in the catalytic plot point, he borrows some money that's been entrusted to the state as evidence. The complications are that the DEA wants the money back, his wife is the agent investigating the murders, and his mistress is one of the victims.

Out of Time telescopes most of its action into a single day, and it keeps you on the edge of your seat for all 24 hours of it. Franklin hits paydirt again and again with the small suspense pieces that comprise the film, and he has a sense of pacing — a quality all but lost in American film — that intuitively keeps him from overreaching. The suspense is killing, but the sense of being in the hands of a skilled storyteller is relaxing, too. *Out of Time* is a blast without making you work for it.

A peripheral talent of this director's is the ability to incorporate minority characters into his movies believably; no other director exhibits this trait to a similar extent. Maybe partly because of that, Franklin elicits terrific performances from every one of his leads here; I think that it's liberating for minority actors to work in an environment so truly "color-blind," to be trusted to deliver performances without the usual Hollywood stereotyping or self-conscious lack of it. And I think that that freedom is read across race lines, so that the white actors deliver, too. Even Dean Cain, formerly TV's Superman, here playing a criminally evil security guard, comes across; who might have expected that?

Franklin's last critical success — if *Out of Time* is in fact a critical success — was 1992's *One False Move*, a similarly taut genre piece that had a lot of people awaiting a really great film from him. I think *Out of Time* is it. Hollywood's highstyle productions have blinded a lot of moviegoers to craftsmanship. But has it blinded the critics, too?



IN PRAISE OF LOVE

DVD pick o' the week

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by [Jake Euker](#)



In his long and varied career Jean-Luc Godard has been a lot of things, chief among them the prime creative force behind the French new wave. But one thing he has never been (in my experience, and I admit up front to having skipped much of his forbiddingly esoteric works of the past 20 years) is a master filmmaker. His cinema was one that was spontaneous, in the moment, improvisational, and boldly experimental, not one that showed a master's restraint, studious decision-making, a craftsman's polish. He didn't storyboard; that was for David Lean.

But unpredictability is another of Godard's hallmarks, and with his newest film, 2001's *In Praise of Love*, he again defies our expectations. Not to say that the film is storyboarded — never that — but it does show the maturation of a famously untamed, confrontational sensibility. His method here is certainly unconventional — a series of small, often unconnected scenes in which the dialogue frequently overlaps and the camera is seldom on the speaker, followed by black screens, or screens with repeated printed phrases. But the formal elegance of the film reveals careful forethought and a deeper logic (and the images an aesthetic intelligence heretofore unmatched in this director).

The plot shows us Edgar, a young filmmaker, casting a projected feature (it may be a film, or it might be an opera or novel) about the nature of love; he meets a young woman in whom he develops a romantic interest, and realizes that he met her once two years before. The film then

shifts back to the previous encounter (moving also from a magnificent black-and-white to jarringly saturated color video) where Edgar interviews two former Resistance fighters who have just sold the rights to their story to Steven Spielberg over the strident objections of this same woman.

Was it just last week, in my *Kill Bill* review, that I was trumpeting the virtues of plot and character? Godard all but abandons them here, and yet he's produced a work as beautiful and meaningful — even if, as some people argue, the meanings might never be sorted out — as anything I've ever seen on the screen. Free-associative, unreasonable and stubborn, unresolved, and elegiac in tone, *In Praise of Love* is one of cinema's greatest meditations on memory, aging, and love. It's not a work to stand next to the director's wild-eyed masterpieces of the 1950s and '60s, next to *Breathless*, *Weekend*, or *Band of Outsiders*, although it may be just as great. Rather, it's one-of-a-kind, an awesome feat of cinema, a single entry in a category of one. *The Wichita Eagle's* Bob Curtright would tell you that it's "not for all tastes"; he would be right. But it's essential. If film is among your serious interests, it can't be missed.



Tarantino's experiment in pure cinema

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by [Jake Euker](#)



BADASS BABE: Uma Thurman pulls out all the stops as a revenge-obsessed assassin in Quentin Tarantino's long-awaited *Kill Bill*.

K

ill Bill: Vol. 1 is all candy. This new film by Quentin Tarantino has a premise, the way anime or video games do, but it has no plot. Rather it's a puzzling series of set pieces, often wondrous to behold, but essentially without a narrative in any conventional sense. In *Kill Bill*, Tarantino's made a film that's a self-described homage to the Shaw Brothers, based on a magna, written — if the credits are to be believed — by himself and his star, that's a riff on everything from the *Charlie's Angels* TV series to *Star Trek* to the Toho horror film *Kwaidan*. But its real theme is Tarantino's alone. It's about everything that he loves in movies and music and pop culture; it's about the pop culture universe whirling around in his brain.

Tarantino has devised *Kill Bill* so that he can reroute the plot and action at any time to get to the things he's really interested in, and what he's interested in here is spectacle. The film's story begins — which is a different thing from when the film begins — with a wedding at which everyone is slaughtered by a group of female assassins led by Bill (Keith Carradine, whom we so far haven't seen, although *Volume 2* is due out in months); the bride (their former associate, played by Uma Thurman) survives unexpectedly, awakening from a four-year coma to seek revenge on those who participated in her near-demise. It's the death of these assassins that's the substance of the film.

Formally, it's elegant; Tarantino plays around with the framework, so that Chapter 1, for instance, is entitled "2" and deals with the killing of the second assassin on the bride's list. Even before the credits have rolled, he's started with the jokes, such as a '70s title card of the sort we used to see

in theaters that says "Our Feature Presentation." And the rise to power of the second victim — a syndicate boss named O-Ren Oshii (Lucy Liu) is rendered in an animated chapter that shows her parents' brutal killing which she witnessed when only a child. (Her *actual* rise is skipped over because, one assumes, it didn't interest the director.)

What fills the screen in *Kill Bill* is the battles. These are gorgeous, ingeniously shot and staged by Robert Richardson, and with awesomely evocative art direction by Daniel Bradford. In lesser hands, these would fail; a less accomplished director would muddy the action and lose the characters — and their unique traits — in the action. But Tarantino maps the action carefully, with only the slightest effort in evidence, and he keeps his characters human; Thurman visibly shakes and breathes heavily toward the end of these battles so that, though the action remains humanly implausible, you're still aware that it's a human on the screen.

But, ultimately, *Kill Bill* is not human. It's cinema as cinema. Scorsese tried a similar thing in *Raging Bull* when he distilled the essence of Jake LaMotta's story into a framework onto which he could hang effect after effect, and Oliver Stone had a stab at it in the remorseless and unredeemable *Natural Born Killers* (which was written, not coincidentally, by Tarantino, who withdrew his name from the final product). But Tarantino's sensibility is different from these men's; where they function best within traditional filmmaking, Tarantino is gleefully indifferent to most established film conventions in *Kill Bill*. He's like a hyper, too-bright child, worrying you for your attention and jumping from thought to thought in his brain.

Kill Bill is built on sensation, and it comes to us with its own universe of built-in references; a frame rarely goes by that isn't informed by trivia, in-joke, or homage. (His production company is named A Band Apart, a tribute to Jean-Luc Godard's film *Band of Outsiders*, the French title for which is *Bande à Part*; and Godard was, of course, the master of the cinematic tip-of-the-hat.) The film, by way of homage, toys constantly with the genre of Hong Kong actioner typified in the works of the infamous Shaw Brothers, who turned out too many of these films in the '70s to count. In *Kill Bill* this influence manifests itself in wonky '70s flourishes on the soundtrack and in the way wounds blow blood sky-high in sprays when inflicted.

But is it a good movie? I don't think so. It's an experiment, an effort to make a new kind of film that's pure cinema, without the connective glue of plot and character refinement. It's often a blast to watch, but without the dynamics of plot — which the director used so well in *Jackie Brown* — a lot of the more realistic violence passes over from entertainment into gratuity. And without development of the characters, we never find a way to invest emotionally in the film. *Kill Bill* was unsatisfying for me, but then I, like Tarantino, grew up on narrative-driven entertainment, and a lot of the audience members, influenced by video games, anime, MTV, may not have been to the same extent. Rooting for the Thurman character in the film is like rooting for the Mario Brothers: we do it, but impassively. It's a different thing from rooting for Dorothy and Toto. And part of the reason we root for the Mario Brothers is that we want to see the next level, where a shiny new spectacle presents itself. And so it is with *Kill Bill*.

People are uncertain of their opinions about this film — ask them and you'll see. Where critical and audience opinion finally falls on *Kill Bill* may have a real impact on where film goes from here.



House of the Dead: A new low in film!

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by [Jake Euker](#)



WORST MOVIE EVER?: Don't waste your money, or your adjectives, on the nigh-unwatchable *House of the Dead*.

H

ouse of the Dead struggles very hard to recreate the experience that the video game upon which it is based provides. Re-read that if you need to, but be sure to understand that this *movie* is trying to be like a *video game*. When a player — I hesitate to call them "characters" — dies, the camera spins around a freeze frame of him as the screen goes red; this tells you that, for him, the game is over. Every few minutes, clips of the actual video game are inserted into the movie; you'll have to take my word for that because I don't want you spending hard-earned money to find out for yourself. I kept waiting for the word RELOAD to flash on the screen, but the joke was on me because it really *did*.

I didn't quite know how to express my disbelief. The rest of the audience did: they left, at least a

third of them by my count. They weren't playing this game, so why should they stay? I soon followed, but I'll bet you money that the words GAME OVER flashed at the end.

What is it? It's about a group of victims, led by Simon, the world's leading underwear model, who set out for an island in Puget Sound where a huge rave is being held; there they are attacked by zombies until all but one of them dies. Every one of these ravers is a world-class martial artist, an accomplished marksman, and an expert fencer, so it takes a long time, and innumerable zombies, to kill them.

Everything is wrong with *House of the Dead*. It's one the very worst movies I have ever seen; I'm sorry almost that I wasted adjectives like "bad" on movies like *The Core* and *Daddy Day Care*. I want you to know that this film is so much worse than those, that it resides in a place at the very bottom of a filmgoer's consciousness where oily dross settles in pools amid half-remembered fragments of Cinemax soft-core, Turkish remakes of *The Exorcist*, and third-string Troma releases such as *Fat Guy Goes Nutzoid*.

My consolation is in knowing that in 15 years or so, when the carefully cutting-edge technology and self-consciously hip attire of the film have been rendered murderously quaint, we can all howl with laughter as we watch it, just as we howl at *Viva Knievel* and *Lambada: Forbidden Dance* now. Will the director, Uwe Boll (I'm guessing, based on the performances, that this man is not fluent in English, and I'm not joking), ever work again? Hollywood is so inscrutable to me that I'm nervous guessing.



DeVito makes angry *Duplex*, but stars shine

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by [Jake Euker](#)



OK AND GREAT: Ben Stiller does fine, but Drew Barrymore is becoming a first-rate actress with her comedic timing.

The problem with Danny DeVito as a director is that he's every bit as nasty as he pretends to be. In his comedies *The War of the Roses*, *Throw Mamma from the Train*, and the new film *Duplex*, he doesn't build a joke around violence, for instance; the joke *is* the violence.

When, in *Duplex*, a young woman (Drew Barrymore) beats the daylights out of her husband (Ben Stiller) for the benefit of a cop who needs to believe she's abusing him, there's no follow-through. She doesn't spit invective at him, or even call him "bitch." She just wallops him and the joke is done. Earlier in this film, she vomits in his face; because the film's trappings are adult and the screenplay literate, DeVito seems to offer this gag as a grown-up variation of the kind of fart-and-vomit humor that's passed around at the cineplex every day. But why? It is what it is, and Barrymore, with or without the moody-dark cinematography and film in-jokes, has just vomited in Stiller's face. There you go.

I don't object — there's a place and an audience for his type of thing, I suppose — I just think we ought to acknowledge it for what it is. *Duplex* isn't terrible, and before the nastiness really gets churning it has some very funny scenes — usually when Eileen Essel, as a seemingly harmless little old lady named Mrs. Connelly who lives above the couple, is present on screen.

Mrs. Connelly is a delicious comic creation. She lives alone with her horrible macaw, she putters around the house days and watches TV nights, and, almost incidentally, she ruins the lives of the couple downstairs to the extent that they resort to plotting her demise.

Essel is hilariously right in this role, and she survives through the indignities that the screenplay suffers on her, such as a scene where she masturbates in a bath tub or another where she grotesquely shares a snack with her bird.

De Vito's taste in movies isn't as bad as his sense of humor, and this film is an homage to 1955's *The Ladykillers* (in which Katie Johnson played a similarly dangerous harmless old lady).

Stiller, as the husband, is best here when he's fumbling for words or completing his thoughts with gestures or expressions.

Barrymore, who is growing into one of America's really first-rate actresses, displays a winning comic presence that, like Essel's, triumphs very much in the face of adversity. Her acquiescent nods, reassuring hand pats, and glowing smile are pure charm, and when she's finally rendered homicidal, all that charm pays off in spades. I sometimes think that she alone in her generation deserves a place in the ranks of such great earlier screen comedienues as Jean Harlow.

And just as you're beginning to enjoy her, there's DeVito again with another of his mean-spirited jokes. He also opts for the macabre every time he has a choice, so that good comedy is interrupted periodically by the inexplicable.

Stiller buys a "clapper" so that he can turn off Mrs. Connelly's TV from his own apartment after she's fallen asleep with it blaring. He does, but then she turns it on again and then off, he turns it on by accident, she off and on, and so on for a whole minute or longer of screen time. I waited for the pay-off — that the macaw had learned to imitate the clapping noise and was just repeating it randomly — and it never came. Instead of what I thought was a pretty funny bit, we're left with an open-ended, weird experience: Why did she turn it on and off, again and again? You know what I think? I think DeVito edited the punch-line out. I'd bet you money he did.



Quaid extraordinary in ordinary *Manor*

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by [Jake Euker](#)



THEY LOOK LIKE THEY'RE IN A HORROR MOVIE: Great performances by Dennis Quaid and Sharon Stone can't quite salvage the beautiful mess that comes out of the too clichéd to be quirky thriller *Cold Creek Manor*.

The trappings of the new Mike Figgis film *Cold Creek Manor* had prepared me for a supernatural thriller: there's the run-down estate, the empty swimming pool, a family's belongings left behind; people are unaccounted for; and the boy of the estate's new family — who think they've found their dream home and can't wait to renovate — finds a document in a child's handwriting that warns him of a certain Hammerhead, and this boy memorizes the material and seems to draw away. None of this pays off — none of it. It's strange, as though it were the director who had come up missing. Leaving the theater the biggest mystery to *Cold Creek Manor* was the thinness of its resolution and the arbitrariness of the material.

But you can't dismiss it, either. On the desultory path that *Cold Creek Manor* wanders, peripheral attractions occur that gradually displace the thriller and themselves become the substance of the film. What begins as a thriller becomes a study of a man's ungoverned instincts of self-preservation and protection of his family; it's as though Figgis set out to make *What Lies Beneath* and ended up with *Straw Dogs* instead.

The man is Cooper Tilson, played by Dennis Quaid. Figgis makes a gift of great performances to his leading players — Richard Gere and Andy Garcia give their best performances in the director's *Internal Affairs*; Nick Cage took the Oscar for his redeeming, painfully deep portrait of a dead-end alcoholic in *Leaving Las Vegas*; and in *Cold Creek Manor* Figgis lifts Quaid from the ranks of older leading men and presents us with an actor whose subtleties and range are emotionally killing.

After *Cold Creek Manor*, the callow machismo of Quaid's performance in a film like *The Big Easy* seems like the work of another man. Quaid is just extraordinary here; playing the father of the family, a studious and scrupulous documentary filmmaker, Quaid moves from the role of passive caretaker to dangerously threatened man with such agility that it seems the most natural thing in the world. This transformation is barely even scripted; Figgis relies on Quaid's performance to convey the perilous dynamics of Tilson's threatened masculinity, and the performance produced by this trust is solid gold.

The plot hardly matters, but it does call for a villain, and in this role Stephen Dorff appears less successfully. His transformation is that of a violent, barroom redneck into a psychopath, and Dorff doesn't manage this protean change. (He's not helped here by the film's strange abandonment of its own premise.)

Sharon Stone plays the wife; she's meant to find an attraction in Dorff, and, although this doesn't come off precisely, her performance is very good. It's maybe not the performance for a thriller, where her attraction would be a catalyst, and should be instantly legible as such; instead, she's unfathomable, conflicted and vague, and even if you can't read her exactly, you can't take your eyes off of her, either. If the film were less focused on the rites and perceived obligations of manhood, she might have been as great as Quaid.

Cold Creek Manor is the best photographed Hollywood film I've seen this year. The cinematography, by Declan Quinn, is marvelous, fluid and clear, and its dynamics are unerring. Quinn takes his camera down an empty hallway to arrive at the family's two children with a hint of something that may be introspection or may be the lightest touch of menace, or he opens a shot on a close-up of the unreadable boy and glides quickly away.

Shots dissolve slowly into one another, lending an ethereal feel to the goings-on and demonstrating the simultaneity of the action and the inevitability of horror.

Action scenes — and there are few of these — have an impact that at first feel like an eruption within the plot, but later, as in the concluding face-off, just seem inept. If we could see a shooting schedule and thus know what order the scenes were shot in, it might hold a clue to this disparity. As it is, the mystery of this inconsistency is far more intriguing than that of the plot.

Because behind the performances and the marvelous look and feel of *Cold Creek Manor* what we've got is a weirdly unfinished film, conceived of in terms it can't — or won't — fulfill. It's absolutely unsatisfying in audience terms; I think most of us will be tempted to boredom or laughter by the film's ridiculously staged final confrontation, where genre conventions are dredged up and presented flatly, and nothing seems to be on the line. Following scenes like one in which the house is suddenly filled with snakes, or in which the boy chants his little poem about Hammerhead alone in the woods, you have no choice but to expect these conventions: without them, nothing makes sense.

But Figgis was making a different film all along, one in which he justifies the behavior of the hero that we're likely to question in films like this. He's far more interested in showing us why Tilson chooses to stay on at Cold Creek Manor after his family has left, even though he knows he's in mortal danger.

Whether he was deliberately subverting our expectations to make the film different from its ilk or whether he simply wasn't interested in the genre, it's a failure. But it's an interesting, sometimes wonderful, failure.



The Other Side of AIDS is dangerous

Originally published October 2, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)

The controversial documentary *The Other Side of AIDS*, which will be screened Friday as part of the opening night program of the Tallgrass Film Festival, takes the position that HIV is not the cause of AIDS. The film, by Robin Scovill, says that the current accepted therapy for treating HIV infection by use of powerful drugs such as AZT and protease inhibitors is, in fact, the most frequent cause of death among those who are identified as HIV-positive; that these therapies are entrenched within the worldwide medical community; and, finally, that those who disagree (called by one interviewee the "dissenters") are not given a voice in the ongoing effort to combat the illness.

The film says that no HIV has ever been isolated in a lab or found within a human, no test has ever been approved by the FDA to detect the virus, no human has ever died of AIDS, nor has any human ever been "cured" of it. For HIV believers, these are matters of semantics, but for those on the documentary's side, the technicalities, such as that no one has died of AIDS, but rather complications thereof, are crucial.

But Scovill wants us to know that this conflict runs deeper, and that many of these "dissenters" feel that their opinions have been forced underground.

The film finds two impressive allies in the persons of Dr. Peter Duesberg, a professor of molecular cell biology at the University of California, Berkeley and Christine Maggiore, an HIV-positive spokesperson for those who live with the virus drug-free. The two, together with many another accredited professional, dominate the first segment of the film, which seeks to discredit, in scientific terms, accepted HIV theory. (Interestingly, scientist Robert Gallo who claims to have discovered the HIV, is largely spared, despite mounting international skepticism over his achievements and concerns about his ethics.)

This first section can be hard to follow, but Scovill makes his best arguments later in the form of testimony from a cross-section of HIV-infected people who argue for a medicine-free lifestyle. These men and women relate heart-breaking, often ironic narratives, such as a man who points out that within HIV support groups, those who made it known that they thought they could beat the virus were told that they were in denial. The film says that society in all its forms — support groups, doctors, public opinion — prepared the HIV-infected for only one fate: death. Maggiore, articulate, winning and attractive, is more than credible when she says that she knew she could win out over the virus, and the medicine-as-poison theme she returns to again and again no doubt

finds a welcoming ear in those who endure horrifying, toxic regimens.

If HIV doesn't cause AIDS, what does? Here *The Other Side of AIDS* is likely to come under fire again (if it hasn't already) for putting forth the view that the gay lifestyle of the 1980s was a natural breeding ground for infections and illnesses of all kinds. It's *not* gay-bashing to make that claim, of course, but the evidence offered by the film is woefully subjective. First person, unquantified testimony from men who lived in gay Meccas like San Francisco paints a portrait of the gay lifestyle as one steeped in drug use, STDs, and malnutrition. One of these men describes the culture as "hyper-permissive," and makes the claim that within this population 100 percent of gay men were committed drug users with at least 200 sexual contacts a year. (As a gay man and a former New Yorker, I personally can refute this claim as breezily as he makes it.) Why, then, did AIDS not occur, say, at Woodstock, where drug usage, lack of sleep, and casual sex might be assumed to have been as rampant? Poppers (amyl or butyl nitrate, used for prolonged orgasm) are offered as the answer. This witness then goes on to state that the occurrence of AIDS confirmed what many of these men had feared: that there was a steep price to pay for this fast lifestyle. This judgment doesn't sink the argument, but it does reveal a moral bias, one that's strangely close to the "God's revenge" argument still used by Evangelical Christians; he's saying that he suspected that there would be hell to pay for this hedonism all along. It's strange to me that this footage is included and that the film lets it stand without questioning it.

Questions are raised by this assessment (who, for instance, is partying all night with poppers in Ethiopia?), and Scovill answers many of them with the argument that AIDS, as a syndrome, doesn't really exist, but is rather a too-broad category into which many already-existing sicknesses have been thrown; the fact that tests seem to indicate the presence of an HIV infection is irrelevant since the tests don't actually detect the virus but rather the antibodies to it, and since false positives can be caused by a host of conditions from pregnancy to common colds.

But, again, it's the human face of the film that fills the screen most persuasively. *The Other Side of AIDS* also introduces us to an HIV-positive Oregon woman (her last name is given, without explanation, as "Doe") who was forced by her state to administer AZT to her HIV-negative newborn despite her conviction that the drug was toxic. Her testimony — that of a woman who believes she was forced to poison her own child, and who lost custody of him anyway — is obviously heartbreaking to the extent that you may wish you had never known. That the argument being made in this interview — that the state has interfered so directly in this woman's beliefs — is a different one from the film's main thesis and is a distinction I fear will be lost on many viewers.

The Other Side of AIDS is a position documentary, and is thus made with the idea of proving its point. As such, detractors are not necessarily allowed to make their cases in full — it's not *necessarily* Scovill's job to do this — and everyone who sees it should be aware that while reference is made to an overwhelming body of evidence against Scovill's theories, that evidence is not presented in the film.

The Other Side of AIDS is made in a rigorous, interview-by-interview method. As a documentary, it would benefit from explanatory narration in its opening sequences, when medical facts are presented to the audience in rapid-fire succession, but elsewhere it's surprisingly engaging given its lack of visual stimulation and unrelenting pace.

However, one very alarming interview will stay with me forever, because of its startling directness and moral ambiguity, and because of the qualms it gave rise to in me as a viewer. In this scene, Scovill is interviewing Mark Wainberg, then-president of the International AIDS Society. Scovill edits the film so that this scene opens with Wainberg directly addressing the camera with eagle-like alertness and a growing hostility; "Do *you* believe that HIV causes AIDS?" he asks the filmmaker.

"I don't have enough information either way," Scovill answers in part.

Wainberg is not fooled, but he goes on to express outrageous sentiments, suggesting that the Constitution should be amended so that people like Duesberg could be imprisoned for putting forth an idea such as that AIDS is not caused by HIV. He says, "Someone who would perpetrate the idea that HIV is not the cause of AIDS is perhaps motivated by sentiments of pure evil. That such a person may perhaps really want millions of people in Africa and elsewhere to become infected by this virus and go on to die of it... And who knows, maybe there's a hidden agenda behind the thoughts of a madman. Maybe psychopaths everywhere have ways of getting their views across that are sometime camouflaged in subterfuge. But I suggest to you that Peter Duesberg is probably the closest thing we have in this world to a scientific psychopath."

Having just seen the documentary, I feel that everyone interviewed in it is well-meaning in terms of battling the illness, Wainberg and Duesberg included. What alarms me most here is Scovill's lie that he personally does not hold the opinion he is in fact making a movie of. He's made a persuasive documentary that may cause people suffering from HIV infection (or *not* suffering from it, depending on whom you ask) to abandon their present drug regimens, and, as this is a life-or-death issue, you expect scrupulous, full disclosure from him. I'm troubled, too, that it's never revealed that Scovill is the husband of Maggiore, whose presence is so central to the film, or that the interview with Wainberg was conducted in South Africa at the 2000 International AIDS Conference where Maggiore (who is shown in the film speaking to rock radio audiences and in a private meeting with San Francisco mayor Willie Brown) was actually addressing that body. Was this fact excluded to lend credence to the idea that Scovill's and Maggiore's opinions are not heard in the *medical* community? The possibility nags at me. We are told that the medical establishment stifles debate on this topic, but the evidence offered in the film is largely Wainberg's outlandish behavior and testimony from Duesberg saying that his reputation as a scientist has been in decline since his arguments were first made.

I'm not a microbiologist or an immunologist, and it's not possible for me to reach a conclusion on the merits of Scovill's arguments based on the facts presented; no one should.

I can only point you back to the quote from Albert Einstein that opens the film: "The important thing is to never stop questioning."

That's true of the film as well. *The Other Side of AIDS* is dangerous filmmaking and should be approached as such. If the ideas presented here are of interest to you, it's your job to find out more.



Underworld is all style, no substance

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by [Jake Euker](#)



VAMPIRES ARE ALWAYS, ALWAYS HOT: Kate Beckinsale stars in *Underworld*, a soon-to-be-forgotten footnote in the annals of vampire movies. Guaranteed to provide background visuals at goth parties for years to come.

Underworld chronicles a battle in a centuries-old feud raging between vampires and werewolves (here called "lycans," short for "lycanthropes"). That's the material of horror films, but *Underworld* is really a fantasy and the world it takes place in, though seemingly present-day, is

as remote from ours as that of *Star Wars*. Here the streets are paved in brick, there are no telephones, and "vampire" is spelled with a "y."

Underworld might have been shot through a jar of India ink; having just seen it, I don't recall a daylit scene, although I figure there must have been some.

The vampires in *Underworld* occupy a kind of chateau that looks like a high-ceilinged Weimar creation, and where the first floor furniture is packed to capacity with women in evening dress who lounge around smoking and gentlemen in long, black coats who do nothing at all.

When Amelia, an "elder" and hence very powerful vampire, arrives in the unnamed European city where most of the action takes place, she is brought in via an antique locomotive whose luxuriousness is incomparable so far as my train experience goes; she too is dressed in evening wear, with a 1940s hairdo, and for a moment you think you're in one of Von Sternberg's crazy vehicles for Marlene Dietrich, like *The Shanghai Gesture* or *The Scarlet Empress*. Her skin, like that of the other vampires, is as luminous as the answer triangle that bobs up in a Magic Eight Ball. "Ask again later," you wait for her to say.

The settings and tony atmosphere of *Underworld* are more than a screen fantasy: they're a conceit, and they're offered to us humorlessly.

The film can't afford humor, since anything a little jokey will show how silly the entire undertaking is. (The entire structure would collapse beneath something as simple as a shot of a QuikTrip or a character named Julie or Dan.)

Like a lot of this kind of faux-sophisticated vampire fantasy — the kind in which a single, red rose is the epitome of elegance — the dialogue is either straight exposition or overwrought blank verse ("The tide of anger and retribution will spill out into the night"). Sometimes it's both: One character needs to tell us that he's bitten another, and, since "I bit him" won't do, the actor is called upon to say, "I tasted his flesh" with pointless malignity.

The plot of *Underworld* is like an entire season of the old vampire soap opera *Dark Shadows* crammed into two hours. Briefly, it deals with a "coven" of vampires whose existence is threatened by the appearance of a pack of werewolves who have been experimenting with a vampire/werewolf hybrid model. Kate Beckinsale gives a blank performance as Selene, a werewolf killer who breaks the covenant of her coven by awakening an elder a century ahead of schedule (they "leapfrog" through time, so that two sleep while a waking one rules).

Another vampire named Kraven (I have no comment on this probable homage, not being a Wes Craven fan myself, although I will note that the part is played very badly by Shane Brolly, who hits the same note for two hours) is revealed to have been in cahoots with the werewolves, a twist evident from the moment this character first appears on-screen. An eternity of conclusion follows — pun intended — and leaving the theater you at least begin to see why immortality would have its drawbacks.

I would have been tempted to laugh at times during *Underworld*, particularly when the angry elder is awakened (his tomb opens with the slow elegance of a DVD tray), but I think that a lot of people take this sort of fantasy very much to heart. In one scene, it appeared that a medical resident was about to give a vampire CPR; I was going to be grateful for this one little joke, but

it didn't happen. You have to buy into the nighttime fantasy to have a good time at *Underworld* because the film is far too serious to fool around.



Catch *Cabin Fever*!

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by [Jake Euker](#)



THIS IS MY RIFLE: Potential cadavers battle a horrible disease and hostile locals in the morbid black comedy/horror flick *Cabin Fever*.

It's easy to see why audiences are cheering the new horror comedy *Cabin Fever*, even if you're a little uneasy about joining in. The film, directed by newcomer Eli Roth, has wit and energy to spare, and many of the jokes (and a good percentage of the scares) connect. Like 2000's *Ravenous*, it mixes up the gruesome and the funny so that your own reactions — laughter tinged with outrage — startle you.

The jokes begin with the title. In *Cabin Fever* the requisite group of good-looking kids head into the forest for a relaxing weekend at a cabin. The locals are, of course, hostile, and include a young teenager (sporting a hairdo that's a horror in itself) who only emerges from an autistic trance to bite people. (Near the conclusion, this kid shrieks, "Pancakes! Pancakes!" and launches into a terrifying, slow-motion kung-fu dance for no real reason at all.) At the cabin, the kids encounter a man who's contracted a horrifying, Ebola-like virus that's characterized by a lot of bleeding; in this 1970s-horror-derived environment, the kids are taken out one at a time by the

virus, or by the locals, who fear them because of the disease.

Roth, who co-wrote with Randy Pearlstein, has a kind of primitive genius at staging, and as the death toll mounts and the kids are separated, he sets up some of the funniest and most outlandish scenarios for murder since Tobe Hooper's heyday back in the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* days. In one scene one young man holds a vicious, infected dog at bay with a shotgun while another works nervously under the hood of a car with his back turned to it. It's an ingenious balancing act (and it's unnecessarily thrown away). In another scene, a young man appeals for help to what must be one of the three or four weirdest cops in the history of sound film, and as he's talking a report comes over the radio identifying the kid as a killer; chaos ensues.

Roth, who has worked steadily on film crews since he was 18 years old, has a rabid fascination with movies, and *Cabin Fever* is brimming with film in-jokes and homages to the creators of other big horror films, such as a mysterious human in a bunny suit that's a tip of the hat to Kubrick and *The Shining*. His love of this kind of material shines through the bald spots and the bad judgment, such as an ill-conceived bowling alley flashback, and the flimsy script, you soon realize, is intended as a joke in itself. ("It's like being in an airplane when you know it's going to crash," one character notes.) Roth has a sense of the language of young people and a soft spot for weird colloquialisms, so that a country grocery sells "hoop cheese."

In the theater, as it became clear to me that I was watching a black comedy about a horrible physical illness, I had my doubts. And as a young woman, the first of the group to be infected, was led to a barn where she was to be "cared for" away from the rest, I thought that maybe the material was better suited to Carl Dreyer or Ingmar Bergman. But *Cabin Fever* is so hilariously gruesome and overblown that the gamble of it won me over.

Horror movies lately have been asking us to settle for something that's shocking or graphic, but that's seldom much fun. *Cabin Fever* is nothing but.



***The Order* an unfortunate waste**

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by [Jake Euker](#)



HANDSOMEST PRIEST EVER: Heath Ledger may fill out his collar nicely, but it's not enough to make up for the rest of *The Order*.

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he *Order* is a supernatural thriller of the kind that RKO and Universal put out as second features in the 1940s and '50s. It has all the trappings: the dark interiors, rainy exteriors and arcane cults, long since driven underground, whose ends are nefarious and whose methods are murderous.

It's preposterous, silly rather than frightening, and the performances and characterizations have a pot-boiler feel to them.

The difference between *The Order* and a comparable film, like 1955's *Cult of the Cobra*, is that *Cult of the Cobra* was knocked out in weeks and its budget was nothing. *The Order*, on the other hand, will have set 20th Century Fox back a pretty penny — the interior of St. Peter's in Rome was apparently recreated for a location, for instance — and the studio, having invested a small fortune in it, will expect the film to be taken seriously. No one at Universal imagined that *Cult of the Cobra* was anything more than a silly thriller; *The Order* is intended as a potential event.

Cult of the Cobra had its charm, but *The Order* has only profligacy. Watching it, you can't help thinking what a waste it is.

The story is that of a Catholic priest of the Carolingian order — a kind of vigilante splinter group that slays demons and so on — whose mentor has been slain by a "sin eater." This sin eater, who consumes your sins on the deathbed, thus granting you absolution, is the last of his kind, a throwback to centuries far past, and the official church stance is that there is none left. (In reality, the practice appears to have existed only in England, and the church's involvement is

questionable.) Our hero Alex (Heath Ledger) travels to Rome in the company of a woman from whom he once exorcised demons (Shannyn Sossamon) and the only other remaining Carolingian (Mark Addy), where the three hope to track down the sin eater and destroy him.

Probably, reading this, you can accurately predict the ending of *The Order*.

As filmgoers, Americans have become pretty sophisticated at parsing pop culture narratives, which is less a compliment to American filmgoers and more a stab at the lack of variety the films themselves provide. (At least *The Order* doesn't aspire to a twist ending, Hollywood's latest, last-ditch compensation for the vacuity of their plots.)

Ledger plays the priest whose sense of justice drives his every action and which serves as a justification for his sexy, haunted look. What Ledger has going for him is an air of decency and a square-jawed virility. In *The Order* he maintains a perpetual few-days' growth of beard and his broad shoulders fill out his robes appealingly; the sacred garb actually breathes a deeper sexiness into him, saying that he's sensitive as well as readily masculine. To cast him opposite dark little Shannyn Sossamon is to telegraph his fall from the priesthood with startling efficiency. Sossamon's character is likewise tortured (the demons in these films always inhabit the naive and vulnerable), and when she and Ledger finally consummate their love, it's treated with the tender, candlelit innocence of an *Endless Love*. Lust, director Brian Helgeland wants us to know, isn't in it.

In *Cult of the Cobra*, our heroes were fighting the Lamians, an order of Indian cobra-worshippers. In *The Order*, Ledger's devotion to truth and purity finds its enemy in the Catholic church itself. In 1955 I don't think this would have been possible, although one can see how, with its ancient rituals, labyrinthine history, and Byzantine secrecy, Catholicism lends itself to the role of backdrop to horror. *The Exorcist* was the beginning and, in my opinion, the church became fair game when it lent its support to the production of that parade of atrocities.

Today it follows naturally that Catholicism is going to be brought in anytime the proceedings are diabolical, as in *Stigmata*, *Angel Heart*, *Bless the Child*, *The Seventh Sign*, *The Omen*, and so on, forever. *The Order* plays the Catholic church the way political thrillers play the federal government: as an shady, knee-jerk, bureaucratic entity that is not just covering up the truth but tacitly participating in the evil-doing. When, at the end, Alex is brought into direct opposition to the church, it's understood that the church has martyred him.

I don't think people's faiths should be mocked, but I'm not much bothered by *The Order*, either, because it comes across so frivolously that you'd have to really be spoiling for a fight to be outraged by it. A devout Catholic might feel differently.

What does bother me is the system that put *The Order* on the screen, the event-driven Hollywood mindset that is more interested in putting out possible blockbusters than providing filmgoers with a broader palette of smaller, potentially more interesting films. A less bloated version of *The Order* might have been a passable entertainment, something spooky for a fall evening. What we get instead is a lame, gigantic, waste, too grandly conceived to be just silly and fun. And, like Alex, it has no lust in it.



Swimming Pool worth diving into

Originally published September 4, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



FREEDOM FRIES, MY ASS: Ludivine Sagnier portrays a saucy sex fiend in the new French thriller *Swimming Pool*.

The new François Ozon film *Swimming Pool* is a sexy, good-looking thriller in the tradition of Ozon's countryman Claude Chabrol. Chabrol, who was popularly described in the '70s as the French Alfred Hitchcock, produced such loose, poetic suspense films as *Le Boucher* and *La Femme infidèle*, and in *Swimming Pool* Ozon achieves a similar lyricism. His action, like that of Chabrol's, takes place more in the hearts and minds of the protagonists than in a police car or amid a gun battle, but his films are sleeker than Chabrol's; in *Swimming Pool* the smallest shift of a camera can provide an insight into a character's motivations on an almost subconscious level. In one scene a novelist is shown writing in close-up in the center of the frame, and the camera gradually shifts her face to the left to show her unmade bed in the background. The unmade bed is pertinent, but then almost every image in *Swimming Pool* is.

Swimming Pool tells the story of Sarah Morton, the novelist. She's an attractive 50-something, and she's stereotypically British: she wears sensible clothes, she's fastidious in her diet, and her

idea of letting loose is a glass of wine with lunch. Her genre — murder mysteries, with a recurring sleuth named Inspector Dorwell — is the most precious in all of fiction, and you can see at a glance that, for her, it's an outlet for everything she's repressed in her own life: sex, the possibility of violence and lawlessness, spontaneity in matters of the id and of the heart. The one impropriety she's allowed herself is a fling with her publisher, but after a minor professional disagreement with him, she accepts his offer to take some time off at his French villa, where she hopes to find inspiration for her new book.

It would be a dream but for the unexpected arrival of the publisher's daughter Julie, a nymphomaniac beauty who smokes pot and leaves dirty dishes lying around the house, as well as the occasional partly-dressed lover. Julie's not given to remorse; it's unclear whether she experiences any in the first place. She swims naked in the villa's swimming pool whenever she cares to, and before long this carefree, voluptuous young woman in the pool becomes a rebuke to Sarah's mannered life. And this rebuke finds a symbolic manifestation in the pool itself.

The two try to ignore one another, and their occasional meetings take the form of spats. Sarah begins to exhibit a deeper side, a kind of vengefulness that verges on madness. She spies on Julie with her lovers and she forages through the younger woman's belongings. It soon becomes clear that, as material for the new novel, Inspector Dorwell has been replaced by Julie herself. As an uneasy alliance is formed between the two, the relationship becomes far more complex and unhealthy than anything either of them could have imagined. Julie arrives home bruised in the face; she tells seemingly pointless lies; and, most important, she develops a reliance on Sarah that defies ordinary emotional decorum. And then, in what has started out as a psychological suspense piece, a man is murdered — or *possibly* murdered — and the film slips quietly and a little eerily into unexpected territory.

That's the plot, but, as in Chabrol, the plot is not the thing. What drives *Swimming Pool* is the transformations that take place within its characters and the extent to which we identify with them. Charlotte Rampling, playing Sarah, gives a wonderful performance — she keeps maturing, so that before long it will be possible to forget *Orca the Killer Whale* entirely. Her lynx eyes and composed gaze have always held the camera, but in her less grounded scenes in *Swimming Pool* she delves a little deeper, so that at times she brings Isabelle Huppert's lunatic *Piano Teacher* to mind. (I have not seen Rampling's other work with Ozon, and it's possible that this madness she's discovered within herself was in evidence there, too.) It's a pleasure to watch Rampling's smallest gestures here, her removal of a cross above her bed, her grocery shopping, her decision to smoke a little pot with Julie. And, best of all, Rampling lets us see small decisions like that one being made.

There's a surprising revelation at the end of *Swimming Pool* that makes the full range of Rampling's achievement here hard to discuss without giving things away. The same is true of Ludivine Sagnier, who plays Julie with the right mixture of disregard for the older woman and the need for her attention — or, more accurately, any attention, even that of the older, unattractive men she brings home for trysts. She's aware of her beauty — it's her only tool — and she flaunts it, taking in her own body as sensuously as the camera does, panning up her sunbathing form on the lip of the pool. She savors the frankly sexual responses she draws from men, but flippantly, like the child she still partly is. The only sexual situation she's not equal to,

as the film shows, is rejection.

Swimming Pool is a tale of role reversals, emotional betrayals, and catharsis, and its elegantly-shot frames slide by engrossingly. Cinematographer Yorick Le Saux plays a key role in Ozon's conception; he's constantly shooting into mirrors, so that a conversation might take place between a real woman and the reflection of the other, and his camera placement is sublimely right. Here the cinematography complements the action instead of intruding into it, and its subtleties, such as the pan described above, are wonderful.

The pleasure of watching *Swimming Pool* is in puzzling out the motives of these women as they engage in their game of domination. The revelation at the end isn't intended as a twist in the traditional way that that device is used; rather, it deepens the enigma of what's gone before it. Loose ends are not necessarily tied up in this film, and leaving the theater there's cause to wonder what's actually happened and what hasn't. It's not a great film, but Ozon is still a young man (he's 36) and after *Swimming Pool* you can't help but wonder what lies in store.



Jeepers Creepers 2 predictable but funny

Originally published September 4, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



A

couple of weeks ago, in my review of *Freddy Vs. Jason*, I had some things to say about the shortcomings of the slasher genre. It would be easy to lump *Jeepers Creepers 2* in with those films, and with all the other garbage like *Darkness Falls* and *Final Destination* and so on, and tear it to shreds. But the fact is that I kind of enjoyed it. And I can report with something like glee that the title song is not used this time, although it was stuck in my head anyway.

That's not to say that I don't know what it is.

Jeepers Creepers 2 sounds as if it were written by its teenage characters; it's surprising to think that any adult might even have *read* it pre-production. ("When people get really drunk their real person comes to the surface," one young woman explains, which, now that I re-read it, is at least in character.)

It's predictable, too, except in a lengthy introductory sequence in which a child is hauled screaming to his demise; I love it when filmmakers let their monsters eat children — you always expect them to get away. In one scene a young man is beheaded and his body remains on the bus where most of the action takes place, but the other kids never again mention it or are even seen to step *over* it; like many of the characters — a young woman who is thrown from a truck, the truck's driver, a young man I could remember since he was named Jake — it just disappears. And when the bus' radio and the characters' cell phones fail, a coach speculates that maybe there is a sunspot.

But the film has some crazy touches, too. In one scene the monster, which can fly, is harpooned by a kind of fishing reel rigged to the back of a truck, and it pulls the truck around the highway like the boat in *Jaws*. There's a fun sequence wherein the teens make a run across a moonlit field and a racist/homophobic character gets nailed to a tree. And in one scene, some real craziness shows through: The monster hangs upside down looking into the back window of the bus at the terror-stricken teens, and the director holds the movie to allow this thing to do all sorts of crazy things, like wink its ugly eye and lick the window lasciviously. It's the kind of insanity that we enjoy watching with our friends, trying to figure out whether or not the director knew what he was doing.

The monster here is identified in the credits as the Creeper. He's an insect, I believe, who comes to life every twenty-three years to feed on humans for twenty-three days. There was something in the first film about how he selects his victims based on certain attributes, but I've forgotten it, and the sequel barely mentions it. Let's settle it by saying that in this film he smells people while they're in fear and decides what part of them he'd like to eat.

Ray Wise plays the avenging father of the boy who doesn't quite make it; he tracks the Creeper to east Highway 9 — there is *no traffic* on east Highway 9 — where he's disabled the bus, which is carrying a high school football team, and is picking them off one by one. Wise is the savior figure, an obsessive who hardly speaks except to shriek, in a funny, pleading way, "Move the truck *now*, Jackie," to his surviving son, who's at the wheel.

Victor Salva wrote and directed, as he did in the original. I liked the first line of that movie (it

was, if memory serves, something like, "That was a stop sign") and that's where it ended. But in *Jeepers Creepers 2* Salva exhibits the occasional flourish, as he did in 1988's efficiently creepy *Clownhouse*. He wears an admiration for David Lynch on his sleeve; he shows the same taste for weird, unmotivated humor, such as in a scene where a spotlight catches a young woman named Minxie running to and fro across the highway, and in dozens of instances he tries to mix the funny and the scary in that special way Lynch does. (It might also account for the appearance of Wise, whom I haven't seen much of since he played Leland in Lynch's *Twin Peaks*.) Salva's talent is ungoverned though, and so long as he's working from his own material, it's likely to stay that way. I had a little hope, thinking that it would be 23 more years before another sequel is possible, but the script was ahead of me, and the ending makes it clear that we'll be seeing the Creeper again soon.

Still, the audience at the showing I attended responded to this film. It's staged with some forethought, and there are a couple of legitimate scares as well as all the deadpan weirdness. When Minxie awakens from a trance in which the full story of the Creeper has been revealed to her, she explains the situation to the other teens on the bus. They ask her how she knows all this, and when she says, "A dead boy told me," the audience howled while the teens in the movie blinked and stared.

Francis Ford Coppola produced.



DVD Pick O' the Week: *The Honeymoon Killers*

Originally published August 28, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



T

he 1969 pulp film *The Honeymoon Killers* is a camp classic to rank with the greatest.

The picture tells the true story of Ray Fernandez and Martha Beck, a pair of outsiders (she a profoundly overweight nurse, he a Latino gigolo with no aboveboard occupation) who met through a Lonely Hearts ad in 1948 and subsequently embarked on a yearlong spree of bilking and then murdering other women who responded to Ray's ad. Both died in the electric chair at Sing Sing in 1951.

Was the film's camp intentional? It's hard to say; director Leonard Kastle never made a film before or since (he hired a director for the film, a newcomer named Martin Scorsese, but then fired him within a couple weeks of filming), and his previous effort had been an opera he wrote about Mormonism entitled *Deseret* which aired nationally on NBC. He had no money to work with, so the film looks and sounds bad, and the performances — especially the victims' — are shrill and amateurish; when these women are then killed, it's like a too-harsh penalty for acting badly.

But Kastle does seem to have had some sensibility, and the film was a hit in 1969 and a blast today.

Shirley Stoler, playing Martha, is a petulant spectacle (she looks and acts a lot like Divine), and she's brave in the role, especially since the screenplay might call on her to kill another woman and then savagely eat a snack.

As her counterpart, Tony Lo Bianco has just the right snake-oil good looks. On his first night with Martha, he does a seductive solo tango with Martha's mother present. "Would you think I was terrible if I gave Mama a sleeping pill?" she asks him in response.

The Honeymoon Killers is newly available on DVD through the Criterion Collection, and it's got great extras, such as a video essay that takes you through the tabloid universe that grew up around the pair in their day, and a new video interview with Kastle.

Was he in on the joke? The question nags me. In his interview he says, "I made one excellent movie." He did. But does this writer of Mormon opera fully understand why?



Migration is pretty, but for the birds

Originally published August 28, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



STRIKE A POSE: This African white pelican takes a break from its hectic filming schedule to slip in a little time at the beach.

T

he new documentary *Winged Migration* is produced by the artistic team that produced the insect documentary *Microcosmos* in 1996. That film was marvelous, and it brought to the small world of insects an almost operatic heroism. The reviews were for the most part ecstatic, but a handful of critics and documentarians challenged *Microcosmos* on a technicality: the insects had not been observed in nature, but rather in "set ups" that recreated the natural world in environments that were more easily photographed. These critics challenged that the film was thus not a documentary, but rather a series of scenes created directly for the screen.

My response was to that complaint was indifferent. What was on view in *Microcosmos* was foremost the insects themselves and second their natural behaviors. Nothing had been truly "staged"; rather, the filmmakers had sped up the process of allowing the insects to act as they would under the same conditions in the wild by providing the conditions in a smaller setting. Call it a documentary or call it by some other name; the fact is that *Microcosmos* was a compelling film that, in my case, went a long way toward easing an uneasy relationship with

what I had always thought of as the ickiest form of life on Earth.

Winged Migration was nominated for best documentary in this year's Oscars race, and now I smell a foul. In one scene in this film, we are aboard a boat on the Amazon in which an illicit cargo of wildlife has been caged, presumably for sale abroad. In close-up, a tropical bird (a parrot, I think, although it's not identified; parrots, by the way, are not migratory) works painstakingly to open the cage in which it is contained. It's heartbreaking to watch its efforts — heartbreaking, that is, until you consider that a camera crew was also on board, a foot or two away from the bird. When the bird frees itself, a second camera, on shore, records its flight back into the forest.

This is not the only occasion in *Winged Migration* in which I sensed a set up. (Another example occurs within the film's framing device: a flock of geese begins its spring migration, but one bird is entangled in a net. A boy cuts the bird loose, and at the end of the film the bird returns to the same pond, still dangling a portion of net from its foot, and the same boy is there to greet it.) Maybe this was all serendipity, but then maybe *Born Free* was a documentary, too.

Concerns of validity aside, the stars of *Winged Migration* are the birds themselves and the feats of cinematography that bring them so vividly to the screen. Among the many varieties of bird we meet are geese, ducks, storks, terns, and more exotic items, like penguins, parrots, albatross, and pelicans. In the film's best sequences, we see them in flight, close up (hang-gliders, I understand, were used in many of these sequences), and it's understood that we've never had views like these before. Even a familiar bird, such as a Canadian goose, can attain a surreal quality, seen silently gliding across a distant landscape in these sequences. Shot from a distance, the flocks of innumerable birds have a *trompe l'oeil* quality; they resemble giant atoms, plagues of locusts, Escher drawings, or those trick pictures you stare into until a second, 3-D image emerges. An enormous flock of king penguins on an ice shelf, viewed from afar, looks like the crowd at Woodstock. And the landscapes against which they are photographed are often awe-inspiring and strange, like those of *Koyaanisqatsi*, and you can't imagine where on Earth such topography exists.

Chance — real chance — provides some memorable moments. A flock of birds flying across the ocean happen upon a ship at sea, and we see them matter-of-factly walking the passageways and napping on the deck, presumably happy to have a break. In my favorite sequence, we meet the breasted goose, a long bird with bright white outlines that make it look skeletal; on their fall migration, they happen upon an industrial port where they're photographed against a nightmarish background of ugly machinery and fire, and their nightmare surroundings are reflected in the water. Leaving, a single bird is mired in an oily goo and left behind.

There's a place in called *Winged Migration* for these small tragedies, but the filmmakers can't resist adding a second, small theme that seems out of place: that of man's role in making an already perilous journey that much more dangerous. In addition to the suspect and gratuitous Amazonian material, we see ducks being fooled by a decoy and shot at, a captured toucan, a Canadian goose in a cage who suffers pitifully when a flock of wild geese fly overhead. This material seems to be present to add "substance" to the film, the message that that man is a predator and a destroyer of nature. I don't question the truth of that, but I do question the filmmakers' decision to include it here. Is a message, however secondary, necessary to a film

about the wonders of flight?

Also detracting is the film's choice of music. Robert Wyatt sings for a moment at the beginning and end, and at first it's a relief to hear this great vocal stylist who is so under-appreciated. But the film continues in this vein, using quasi-world music, complete with choirs, when something more majestic is needed. In one sequence, a piece with staccato strings is heard as we watch a flock of red-crowned crane, a crazy-looking bird, elaborately feathered in black and white with red caps on their heads, and the music matches their nutty-balletic movements and their insanely *haute couture* appearance. For a minute you think they've got it, but then it's back to music that might be sung in Gaelic, with percussion predating big band.

I couldn't take my eyes away from *Microcosmos*, but *Winged Migration*, in the end, bordered on wearying. The film follows a year in the lives of these migratory birds, but the material seems shapeless just the same. And no question was raised that might have held me; the impulse, the genetic coding that makes these migrations necessary and possible, for instance, was only just touched on and then dropped. *Winged Migration* needs to soar, and it sometimes does, and I can recognize it for the achievement it is. But I left the theater not knowing much more than I had going in, my two feet planted squarely on the ground.



DVD Pick O' the Week: *The Good Thief*

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by [Jake Euker](#)



N

eil Jordan's *The Good Thief*, which played for a minute locally earlier this year, is a great film, the best and most enjoyable English-language crime picture since *Jackie Brown*. It's a remake of *Bob le Flambeur*, one of the masterful crime films that France had a corner on in the '50s, and, like its predecessor, it tells the story of a hard-living gambler in the south of France who has a plan to rob a safe at a Monte Carlo casino. He succeeds, but in an unexpected way, and the underhanded dealings and shifting allegiances of Bob and his crew make for great screen entertainment.

Central to the film is Nick Nolte's terrific performance as Bob. He's a junky raconteur who wears the same flashy shirt and coat every day, and who has strict rules about how to treat women and about how one behaves at the roulette wheel. He's sometimes broke and he's sometimes rolling in cash, but he has a Picasso oil painting on the wall and he can always find a little heroin when it's needed. He's an expatriate and he's deportable, but everyone in his milieu — the whores, the dealers, the grifters, and even the police chief — like him because he can tell a good story and because he never crosses the line from gentlemanly thievery into the unforgivable: common crime. Nolte has dozens of opportunities to steal a scene here — he even goes through withdrawal — but he opts for restraint every time.

Jordan's conception of the contemporary French underworld is dead-on. It's a seedy group in a seedy locale (the ports here are clogged not with yachts but with cargo ships, and the interiors are likely to be shot in bad techno bars, the new scourge of Europe). But Jordan's vision is one in which the old Europe shines magically through: the rottenest of the French in this film could tell

you that it was C»zanne who painted Mont Ste-Victoire, and they could likely spot a counterfeit. They have access to a suit and tie because men sometimes need a suit and tie. And Jordan manages the trick of bringing the romance of the old Europe visually alive through the filter of contemporary urban ugliness; when he shoots Monte Carlo, for instance, he does so from the winding highway that traditionally links it to France, and it shines in the night like a glittering bracelet flung against the CŸte dŰAzur.

The Good Thief is now available on DVD. It ditched the theaters and the summer audiences, and now it's your duty to not let it get away.



Surprise: F vs. J has nothing new

Originally published August 21, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



YOU AND ME, WE'RE NOT SO DIFFERENT: In *Freddy Vs. Jason*, two successful film franchises are merged into one movie almost certainly guaranteed to drain audiences of any remaining interest in either.

F

reddy Vs. Jason exists in a place beyond criticism. It hasn't got a plot to speak of, or characters;

like the recent *Rollerball* remake, it in many ways verges on the experimental. Its story is a shapeless amalgam of material, strung together and projected in the dark to an audience without expectations.

In this film, *Nightmare on Elm Street's* Freddy Krueger brings *Friday the 13th's* Jason Voorhes back from hell to frighten the teenagers now living on Elm Street in order to reintroduce fear into their lives, since it's fear that gives Freddy his power. That's more plot than usual, but more plot here just adds the dimension of confusion to an already dead enterprise. The result is that the film is just as bad as the others, or worse, actually, since it has higher aspirations.

The film asks us to root for Jason in the title conflict, so it's a morally queasy moment when he attacks and kills a young woman we're supposed to have liked. He's not looking too good; he's now got stringy, long hair protruding from his hockey mask, but then I can't remember when or how he "died." The filmmakers seem to feel that Jason has been around so long that he's an institution, and there's now something almost likable about him, like a vicious pet dog that's become part of the family. I didn't want to root for him, but then I resented the film's winks at racism and homophobia, too.

Robert Englund, as Freddy, provided me with the only fun I had at the movie, and it was at his expense. He's been playing this part for nearly 20 years now, and he's slowly been turning into a skinless parody of Margaret Hamilton's Wicked Witch of the East from *The Wizard of Oz*. In *Freddy Vs. Jason*, he's there. When he grins and drums his bladed fingers in the air, you expect him to say, "Die, my pretties," and turn loose the flying monkeys.

If you want to blame John Carpenter, I'm not going to stop you. He's not directly involved in *Freddy Vs. Jason*, but it was his *Halloween* in 1978 that birthed the whole slasher genre, and, like the villains in these pictures, it refuses to die.

Slasher films are a dead-end genre.

They have nowhere to go and each film leads to the same tired conclusion. Most of the *Halloween* films and all of the *Friday the 13th* series recycled the same plot and, usually, the same circumstances from film to film, so that the only thing that changed was the line-up of hopeful young actors who were skewered or burned or eviscerated.

Because the killers (Michael Myers and Jason, respectively) were impervious to harm, the films had a built-in air of hopelessness. But slasher films were easy and inexpensive to make — they didn't require ideas, for instance, or screenplays as we understand that term, and they didn't attract big-dollar stars — and teenagers kept going to see them.

In 1984, Wes Craven introduced a kind of innovation with *A Nightmare on Elm Street*: his killer, Freddy, could only kill you while you slept. Since Freddy inhabited a dream world, anything could happen, and this innovation quickly became another of the genre's liabilities: no understandable rules governed anything. So what's the point? Whether or not a frantic teen survived an encounter with Freddy was a totally arbitrary matter.

Friday the 13th and *Halloween* were leading up to this already: their killers could appear anywhere and disappear into thin air. What good can it do to run from a killer who can be

anywhere, who can transform himself into snakes or a boiler or an intelligent gas? And why then should we in the audience care?

The audiences *didn't* care. They weren't present because they empathized with the teenaged victims; they were there to see violence and sex. Teenagers went to see these slasher films when they became old enough (these films are usually R-rated); they went back for the sequel or not, and it didn't matter, because in a couple of years the high schools and the theaters filled with a new audience who themselves had just come of age and whose older brothers or sisters had maybe talked about these same films. It thus didn't matter if the plot remained the same; what was important is that the hair fashions were updated.

With *Scream* in 1996 the slasher genre descended into outright self-parody; that film was predicated on the "rules" of the genre, such as that the virgin survives, except that this mysterious self-parody wasn't done for laughs but rather as a "twist." I can't think of a surer sign that a genre is dead on the screen, and if you can, please call. *Scream* was a success notwithstanding, but by now no one — not even the young audience at the sold-out theater where I saw it — was pretending that suspense was what was being provided. Rather, they laughed at everything, even the murders. Were they laughing *at* the film or *with* it? The distinction, in a film like *Scream*, is impossible to make. Not even the filmmakers had determined whether or not their tone was ironic. Why should they? Who cares?

"Suspense" was never on the menu anyway. Suspense, to put it rather too simply, occurs when you're not sure what's going to happen. What happens in *Friday the 13th* is that a door is opened and either your boyfriend or Jason is standing there unexpectedly, and it's a *shock*. Shock is the slasher genre's stock-in-trade. Is it fun? Not for 90 minutes, or at least not for me, but I don't care for extreme sports, either.

Freddy Vs. Jason bring together all these shortcomings and more. In this blurry dreamworld, Jason attacks you while you're awake, Freddy attacks you while you're asleep, and you move between these two realities arbitrarily and without warning. Is Lori, the young heroine, awake, asleep, in danger, protected? Did her father, in a pointlessly baffling subplot, kill someone or not? I don't care. The audience doesn't care. The filmmakers don't care — I don't think they know. My final question is the most important one: can this really be the end?



***F5* contributor leaves the fold for NYU edumacation.**

***F5* contributor leaves the fold for NYU edumacation.**

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by [Jake Euker](#)



t's a fun game we're playing to mark the departure of our youngest film critic, Johnny Szlauderbach. How young? Eighteen; I mention it only because his sure style and wide knowledge of movies maybe fooled you. Johnny's been writing our DVD picks at *F5* almost since the beginning. He leaves this week for NYU film school.

This was the least self-indulgent of the ideas we had: to list our ten favorite movies. These are our favorites, not the ones we think somehow "best." (They are listed alphabetically, too.) I can't speak for the others, but my list will probably change as early as next week. Maybe that's the thing with favorites.

In Johnny's case, we hope this list will give you a deeper glimpse into what you've been reading every week. In the case of Jason and I, it will maybe give you an idea of our mindsets going into it.

Good luck, Johnny.

Jason Bailey:

Annie Hall (1977)

Boogie Nights (1997)

Citizen Kane (1941)

The Godfather (1972)

GoodFellas (1990)

Out of Sight (1998)

Pulp Fiction (1994)

Raging Bull (1980)

Rear Window (1954)

Sherlock, Jr. (1924)

Jake Euker:

Blue Velvet (1986)

The Dead (1987)

The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie (1972)

I Am Cuba (1964)

Nashville (1975)

Playtime (1967)

Rosemary's Baby (1968)

Taste of Cherry (1997)

Un Chien Andalou (1929)

Weekend (1967)

Johnny Szlauderbach:

Band of Outsiders (1964)

Con Air (1997)

8 ½ (1963)

Manhattan (1979)

Psycho (1960)

Rushmore (1996)

Sweet Smell of Success (1957)

Taxi Driver (1976)

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974)

The Umbrellas of Cherbourg (1964)



***Russian Ark* a stunning cinematic feat**

Originally published August 14, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



CINEMAGIC: *Russian Ark* sweeps across centuries of history in an hour and a half — and in one long, unbroken camera shot. And Godard thought his Weekend traffic jam was something.

In the opening of the new Aleksandr Sokurov film *Russian Ark*, a man (from whose point of view the film is shot, and whom we never see) finds himself at a back entrance of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia (formerly Leningrad) in the company of a group of officers and their escorts. He complains of an "accident," and he can't immediately place his whereabouts, neither physically nor temporally, since the officers are dressed in the uniforms of a previous century. He follows the group inside, where he soon encounters a French aristocrat who is similarly confused by his surroundings, and the two wander the Hermitage (which once served as the Winter Palace of the Tsars), encountering figures, both famed and unknown, from throughout Russia's history, piecing together not just their whereabouts but also the incredibly rich story of the most traditionally beleaguered of the world's great powers.

Russian Ark, although released just last year, is already legendary among cinephiles for an unparalleled technical feat: the entire film, from credits to credits, is shot in a single 96-minute take, the longest uncut and unedited shot in the history of film.

Because the film employs a cast of thousands of principals and extras, because it presents awe-inspiring set pieces within its *mise-en-scene*, and because the filmmakers had access to the Hermitage for just one day, this unlikely and, until lately, impossible stunt is reason alone for *Russian Ark* to assume its place in the history of cinema.

But this magnificent film is so much more than a technical chimera, it is so rich in themes, context and sub-context, visual grace, and lyric beauty, that it would deserve its accolades regardless of its presentation (although the presentation is wed to the content inextricably, since

time, and the passing of time, is one of its themes).

I could write a dissertation here of thousands of words on this film — people have already, and they will for many decades to come — but going further into it in a confined space would without fail do *Russian Ark* a disservice.

To give you a taste of it, I'll mention a few of the images that awed me and leave the experience of the film to you: Catherine the Great being pursued by our protagonist through a snowy evening courtyard; an earlier scene in which she evaluates a rehearsal of a play and then interrupts the goings-on by announcing that she has to pee and rushing about laughing, looking for the nearest facilities; an homage to the victims of the Leningrad blockade in the form of a man in a dingy utility space preparing his own coffin while others litter the floor around him; the appearance of a blind angel, dressed in everyday clothing, who experiences sculpture with her hands; and the breathtaking finale in which a grand exit is made by hundreds of guests through the Hermitage's majestic entrance.

The film, though short in length, is huge, spanning (while only just touching on) centuries. The one chapter of Russian history omitted is heart-breaking in its absence: the years of Soviet dictatorship. (This surely is the "accident" from which our hero has just awakened.) The fact that Sokurov chose to leave it out of his film reflects not just his love of his motherland, but his hopefulness for a brighter tomorrow.

Russian Ark is an audacious and insane experiment, and the fact that it was even completed is something of a miracle. Its aesthetic achievement *is* a miracle. It's a triumphant film.



***Gigli*: terrible in so very many ways**

Originally published August 7, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



BENNIFER WORSE THAN ISHTAR: We guess if you take two attractive and seemingly talented people and let them make anything they want, you get crap. Who knew?

Gigli is not, of course, the worst movie ever made in the United States, but that didn't keep me from describing it that way to anyone who would listen as I left the theater. I was still stinging from an ending so calamitous and stupid that I can't do it justice in words. Calmed down, hundreds of worse titles come to mind, but the titles are ones like *The Lemon Sisters* and *Final Chapter: Walking Tall*. Does it make a difference after all?

Hollywood lore has it that *Gigli* tested poorly with advance screening audiences and that the ending was re-shot; when the film tested in New York in its present form, the producer and the director (Martin Brest, best known for *Scent of a Woman*) reportedly came nearly to blows. I'm not sure who was on what side — one assumes that the director felt that the new ending somehow weakened his vision — but someone certainly should've been beaten for it.

This romantic comedy is the newest chapter in Hollywood's efforts to introduce a gay character into a relationship in order to shake up old material. In this case, it's Jennifer Lopez, a gangland operative who is forced to share quarters with Ben Affleck, who has, for gratuitously plotted reasons, kidnapped a retarded man and must keep him in his apartment.

What starts as hostility develops soon enough into affection as our loveable threesome bonds with one another, and as Affleck's character falls in love with Lopez's, who cannot return his

romantic feelings.

This mutual affection goes on for quite awhile before much of anything happens; what we're dealing with in *Gigli* is a pair of gangsters and a kidnapping victim, yet not a moment of suspense occurs in the film. Brest abandons the thriller angle without notifying the audience, and the film becomes the story of a non-romance — that of Lopez and Affleck — and the ostensibly unconventional love blooming between them.

It thus becomes the job of these two star-crossed lovers to carry the film, and it's part of the tragedy of *Gigli* that they can't.

Jennifer Lopez has shown herself to be a gifted comedian in films like *Out of Sight*, and she has enormous sex appeal and a star's presence on the screen. Yet *Gigli* throws her away by saddling her with a tiresome tough-bitch-with-a-tender-side character. (It's Hollywood's latest variation on the whore with a heart of gold.)

Part of what can be funny about Lopez is her intelligence — who could forget her interrogation of Steve Zahn in *Out of Sight*? — but here her intelligence is used to establish her superiority to Affleck's dumb hood, and her advice to him about finding peace and letting go of anger and so on is doggerel rather than humor. Her character is a leftist Hollywood statement; the leftist part of it is that she's a woman and a lesbian, yet she's still the one in control. The Hollywood part of it is that it's phony.

Affleck, for his part, embodies a New Jersey hood effectively (although the film is set in California), and his performance recalls James Gandolfini's Tony Soprano constantly. He might have been OK, but he really isn't given anything to work with except for his lust for Lopez — how much acting does that really require? — and despite the real-life romance that grew out of their work together here, the two have no timing or dynamism as a screen pair.

The first half of *Gigli* is a drag, an unfunny retread of familiar territory, with a few uncomfortable laughs provided by a retarded man (played by Justin Bartha). The last half is a tragedy.

Hollywood filmmaking is a man's game, and a man's fantasy conception of a lesbian is a hot young woman who has not yet met Mr. Right. As characters, gay men fare somewhat better in Hollywood terms; in films like *My Best Friend's Wedding* and *The Object of my Affection*, they at least make it to the credits with their sexuality intact, and they're allowed to do so because the men making the movies aren't attracted to them.

But lesbianism functions as a turn-on for these men only on the condition that the women involved are of pliable sexuality; this is true across the board, from pornography to *The Hours*. With the bombshell J-Lo in the lesbian part here, do I really need to tell you how the cards fall in the end?

The conclusion of *Gigli* is a disaster not only because it sells out its female lead, but also because it's a dramatic cop-out of groaningly obvious magnitude (and it features — I couldn't believe it myself — a chorus on the soundtrack). It would have been more satisfactory, in audience terms, to have the Good Witch of the East appear in a bubble and transform Lopez into a heterosexual

with a rhyming chant and magic wand.

Brest, directing *Gigli* as a romantic comedy, lets the plausibility of the thriller slide. He's made the mistake of imagining that the love story angle is enough, and we in the audience watch in amazement as the plot disappears into black holes of improbability. When Lopez is introduced, we're given to understand that she's been assigned to the kidnapping to oversee Affleck, but what she does, in fact, is read a book entitled *Being Peace* and engage in yoga exercises on a mat. While federal agents across the country are frantically searching for the kidnapped man, Affleck and Lopez take him out for drives in a convertible. All three sleep the nights away at Affleck's apartment, even after a cop pays him a visit there and indicates that he suspects him of the crime. The three create disturbances. They fail to draw the blinds. When the mob boss orders them to mail the victim's thumb to his brother, they cut one off of a corpse, mail it from a shipping store in a strip mall, write out the address by hand, and Lopez comes on to the clerk. The words "fingerprint" and "thumbprint" then go unused by any character for another twenty minutes or so.

And the conclusion — there are no words for the stupidity of the conclusion. It literally must be seen to be believed, or rather *not* believed, and I don't mean that as a recommendation that you go.

Meanwhile good material slips away. Christopher Walken plays the cop; anyone who's seen him on *Saturday Night Live* knows how underused a comedian he is, and he gives *Gigli* a jolt of comic energy before disappearing, after this one scene, into thin air. Al Pacino gives a likewise energized performance as an indicted crime figure before suffering the identical fate. Another vanishing character is Lopez's girlfriend; in an astonishingly dim-witted sequence, she breaks into Affleck's apartment — our first glimpse of her — and slits her wrists. Lopez drives her to the hospital and the episode and the character are never once mentioned again. Who's retarded here?

Gigli is the worst kind of bad film: a professional one. It may be, technically, a better film than *Final Chapter: Walking Tall*, but I hate it more because everyone involved in *Gigli* should have known better. Its incompetence seems to be a case of Brest mishandling his material; he's misjudged our interest and banked on a chemistry that isn't there. Its spinelessness is probably a cynical attempt on the producer's part to make more cash. Combine the two and you have one for the history books.



***Seabiscuit* too manipulative to be great**

Originally published July 31, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



MMMMM...BISCUIT: A guant Tobey Maguire rides hellbent for victory in *Seabiscuit*. The director orders you to swell with pride.

I

t's not fair to say that the new film *Seabiscuit* is bad, but it isn't very good, either. The story is that of a Depression-era horse who came out of nowhere — in this case California — and overcame the obstacles of her small size and too-large jockey to be named "Horse of the Year," and of the three men — the jockey, the owner, and the trainer — who led her there. Writer/director Gary Ross has crafted *Seabiscuit* to inspire us, just as the actual *Seabiscuit* inspired a gloomy America in her day, but in the end the uplift is hollow. It's a fairly intelligent film, and it's professionally made, but walking away from it, you may feel that there was nothing there.

What's missing? Life. *Seabiscuit* has been made so meticulously that there's nothing left in it for the audience to discover on its own and no room for unprompted feelings.

The film says that *Seabiscuit's* unlikely victories helped to breathe life into the nation's recovery from the woes of the Depression, and it spells it out carefully, intercutting narration and montages of period photos into the action to keep you abreast of history. (It primes you, among other things, on the development of the assembly line, Black Tuesday, and Prohibition.) These newsreel-like passages directly explain the ways in which public life is mirrored in the private lives of the characters, so that there's nothing left for the audience to observe except the construction presented. *Seabiscuit* makes all its connections and observations for you.

The most interesting thing about *Seabiscuit* is Tobey Maguire as Red Pollard, the mismatched jockey who rode the horse to victory. In the past, Maguire's performances have been marked by a kind of quiet observation that may or may not have been masquerading as something deeper. In a film like *The Ice Storm*, for instance, it could be hard to decide if he was playing a kind of alienation and vulnerability that expressed itself in blankness, or if he simply didn't understand his part. And his character's debated sexuality in *Wonder Boys* could have gone in any direction without surprising an audience to whom his performance never gave a clue. In *Seabiscuit* he shows a new side of himself — one that's capable of hostility — and it signals a greater range and openness that he's never shown before. Gaunt, red-headed, and visibly angry at times, Maguire brings the film its only unpredictability.

When, in *Seabiscuit*, Maguire raises his voice or strikes another jockey, the screenplay is there to remind us that his parents abandoned him. It hampers Maguire's performance, but it is as nothing compared to what Jeff Bridges, as owner Charles Howard, suffers. Howard is conceived here as a salt-of-the-Earth type, a millionaire who made his fortune off of cars, but who never lost respect for the common man and who has come to believe in *Seabiscuit* as the antithesis of the industrialization that is dehumanizing America.

When he speaks, the dialogue is likely to take the form of locker-room boosterism — you keep waiting for him to say, "We went out there and we gave 110 percent" — and Bridges, who always makes an effort with his performances, is helpless in the face of it.

Who wouldn't be? Lord Laurence Olivier himself would have been sunk by a line like, "You don't throw a life away just because it's a little broken."

Chris Cooper plays the trainer, and he suffers a similar fate (and is called upon to deliver the very same line). His character name is Tom Smith; that's a historical fact, but the filmmakers couldn't have invented a better one for this plain-spoken, square-dealing man of his word whose behavior with horses verges on the mystical. Encountering barbed wire on the open range, Cooper fingers it as though he's never seen such a thing before, and the strings indicate he hasn't. In one scene, Maguire and Cooper stay over at Bridges' mansion; in the night, Bridges discovers that both his guests have left their rooms, Maguire to sleep in the stables and Cooper under the stars.

The production here is handsome and the cinematography is sweeping, tricky sometimes, but never extravagant, because extravagance in *Seabiscuit* is frowned upon in favor of smaller truths and working-man values.

In terms of prestigious filmmaking it's impeccable, and the audience at the screening I attended — mostly middle-aged couples — responded to it, probably relieved that Arnold Schwarzenegger wasn't going to emerge from a manhole, circuitry exposed, and shed his human skin. I imagine that *Seabiscuit* will find an audience among adults who don't mind — or don't notice — when they're told how and when to feel, so long as the feelings summoned aren't terror, hopelessness and alienation.

The tacit message of *Seabiscuit* is that America will endure through the hardships we're experiencing today just as we did during the Great Depression, and, because few films are saying that right now, I think it would be impossible to explain to the audience that a less manipulative

movie would make it feel more.

Another thing missing from *Seabiscuit* is the horse. The film, to be fair, is more about the human side of horse racing than the equine, but it's a film about a horse just the same, and leaving the theater I realized that I couldn't have picked this champion out of a line-up. (Randy Newman's blandly tasteful score, on the other hand, I couldn't drive from my head.) It's a mild complaint, but one that I think is symptomatic of *Seabiscuit*'s faults: It's a big, handsome production, and it tells you that it's stirring; it insists on it. But there's no animal excitement, human or otherwise. You never once feel the thrill of the race.



***Pirates* better than product tie-ins would suggest**

Originally published July 24, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



AVAST, YE SCURVY CRITICS!: Johnny Depp surprises most everyone with his Keith Richards-inspired pirate take.

P

irates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl is based on the Disney theme park ride — a first? — and it arrives in the theaters ominously packaged for merchandising and reeking of a giant budget. It's just too easy, this summer especially, to imagine all the things that might go wrong with it. But if you're wary, as was I, its quality filmmaking, literate script, and good performances defy you. (And at least it doesn't call itself P/C:C/BP.)

Pirates of the Caribbean comes close to recreating some of the bigger-than-life wonder that we experience at the movies in our childhood.

Its images are awesomely large and its plot has the pull and inevitability of a fairy tale. When cinematographer Dariusz Wolski shoots the sea, he lets the rolling waves or sinister calm fill the screen, and when the Black Pearl, a pirate ship, appears, it emerges from fog like an apparition. (It also leaves a trail of fog wherever it goes, regardless of the weather.)

The film is bathed in moonlight, contrasted with dazzlingly bright tropical shores in the day, and the cities, uninhabited islands, and secret lairs that dot the coasts might have been lifted from your dreams of pirate lore. The Black Pearl is cursed and its crew is made up of zombies — men in the dark but skeletal frights when the moonlight touches them — and to lift the curse these men need a gold amulet and a little blood from a particular victim. It's our hero's task to make sure that this doesn't happen.

Our hero is Captain Jack Sparrow, played, in the casting coup of the new millennium, by Johnny Depp. Jack is a pirate himself, once the captain of the Black Pearl, and he has a single shot in his gun that he's saving for his one-time first mate. He's the hero, but the screenplay gives him plenty of leeway, so that his acts of heroism include commandeering ships that are the property of others, betraying associates, stealing purses, and so on.

Depp, in this role, is a fey, hilarious wonder, and his conception of Jack adds a brand new character to the long rolls of screen pirates. Seeing him today, with his heavy eyeliner, dirty clothes, and a walk that's a compromise between moving forward and falling down, your first assumption would be that he's a junkie (and indeed press interviews reveal that Depp modeled his performance on Keith Richards). But in the context of a pirate film, he's an original, a tattered semblance of a pirate whose resilience and hardscrabble ingenuity are disguised by a hilarious near-drag. Depp has cleared his brain of pirate-film detritus (he never once says "yo ho ho") and he's arrived at a completely re-imagined and original character.

Supporting Depp are Orlando Bloom (far more likeable here than as the cold elf Legolas Greenleaf in the *Lord of the Rings* movies), newcomer Keira Knightley as the heroine, Geoffrey Rush as the mutinous first mate, and Jonathan Pryce as Knightley's cowardly father.

A survey of these names reveals that the film was cast more for acting ability than for box office.

The result is that even the smallest performance in *Pirates of the Caribbean* stands head-and-shoulders above the biggest in *LXG*.

And screenwriters Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio have learned the simple rule — apparently so hard to grasp in Hollywood — not to write down to children; you could strip this film of most of its special effects and it would still engage a child. Gore Verbinski directed; his *The Ring* made

me nervous, but here his work is professional and not too flashy, and he exhibits the good sense to stay out of Depp's way. His action sequences are smooth, even (mostly) in the climax, where we cut between three different battles.

But all this is secondary to Depp, whose performance alone is worth the price of admission. It's the type of insane conception you expect from an older actor, one who's stopped worrying about his appearance, who already has his Oscar, who is no longer on an upward arc and has nothing to risk from going overboard. How many young actors today could pull this insane performance off? How many would even try?



Johnny English is a jolly good show

Originally published July 24, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



TRY MY SUSHI, BABY: Natalie Imbruglia feeds raw fish to Rowan Atkinson in the spy spoof *Johnny English*. You should be so lucky.

R

owan Atkinson (or Mr. Bean as he's more popularly known) is a comedian unlike any other at work right now. His method with a gag is singular: He lets you see the set-up right out of the

gate, and then he prolongs your agony a little, calmly; he toys with the joke for awhile, tottering on the brink, never rushed but never overplaying his hand. Part of the joy in watching his comedy is in the waiting, as the circumstances, in combination with his buffoonery, lead with an almost cruel inevitability to disaster. And when the gag has passed there's more: his reaction, an extension of the punch line, in which the wheels in his head can be seen to be whirling. How can this have happened? How can he make it appear that it wasn't his fault? In some ways he recalls the clowns of silent film (although his comedy is seldom so physical), and he's the only contemporary comedian I can think of who might have worked in that medium.

Working with a talented supporting cast and a director (Peter Howitt) who is willing to give him the space and time he needs, Atkinson has produced a minor classic with his new film *Johnny English*. I don't think that this film will find the audience it deserves immediately (although I'm always wrong about this), but I do think its critical and popular appraisal will rise with time, until it takes its place among terrific small comedies like *Smile* and *Lost in America*, and film references term it "overlooked." If I'm right about its box office, it's a shame, because it shines in comparison to any other comedy I've seen this year.

Johnny English is a spy spoof, along the lines of the Austin Powers films, except that where Austin Powers is a parody of the glitzy, Bond side of espionage, *Johnny English* parodies the genre's more proper side, films like *Get Carter*, where there was lots of Burberry plaid on view and where the hero wore a mackintosh. The evil plot to be foiled in *Johnny English* is one in which a despicable Frenchman (played by John Malkovich, who deploys the most ridiculous French accent since Inspector Clouseau) is trying to be coronated as King of England, unseating Queen Elizabeth, in order to transform the British Isles into the largest prison on Earth. English is made a special agent (by default — he's accidentally killed all the others) and before long he is on the Frenchman's trail. It's not just a wonderfully straightforward plot (by which I mean that it's not taxing to keep abreast of), it also has a fairy-tale quality to it that matches the film's clean, unworried tone.

Atkinson, set loose in this structure, is wonderful. His comedy is precise, as in the troubled reaction shots I spoke of above, but sometimes, spontaneously, he's a total nut, too, as in a memorable split-second in this film wherein he covers his face with a shower cap and waves his hands like crazy paddles. The set pieces, in which the gags are laid out plainly before you, go off like mousetraps and continue successfully much longer than you would imagine that the set-up could bear. (In my favorite, English raids a hospital thinking he's at the evil Frenchman's headquarters. "It's much worse than we thought" he says, finding patients in their rooms.) At Atkinson's side is his faithful sidekick Bough (pronounced "boff") who's slightly smarter than his boss and who gets a lot of laughs by visibly doubting his superior's judgment. He makes for a very good straight man, but he has some comic tricks of his own. And the love interest here, another agent, well played by Natalie Imbruglia, is gracefully treated; the filmmakers, for instance, acknowledge that in the real world this bombshell likely wouldn't be attracted to Atkinson, but they pull it off anyway. And she's given the opportunity to beat the daylights out of a man that we're hoping she'll get to beat the daylights out of all along.

Atkinson is the star, of course, but some of the film's pleasures stem from the fact that the director is not American. This has become another way of saying that the film is well-crafted: Its style is relaxed and unobtrusive, the cinematography (by Remi Adefarasin) allows you a view of

the proceedings, and the filmmaker, unlike American directors like McG and Michael Bay, doesn't feel that he's the star, too. One of the small triumphs of *Johnny English* is its delightful sound editing. A button, once pressed, emits a recognizable, business-like tone before violently ejecting your passenger from a car, and a conveyer belt in a sushi restaurant lets out an ominous, small buzz as it grabs your tie and pulls you through the other diners' meals. Director Howitt takes things for granted, and he expects you to, also; when English and Bough jump from a plane over an urban area with the goal of landing on a specific building, you're asked not to question it, and it's a pleasure not to.

Johnny English is a slight film, but it's a balm. You won't die laughing in the theater, but the filmmakers aren't asking you to, as they do in the frantic, adolescent comedies that dominate the market. They're not trying to knock you out. Nobody's screaming. *Johnny English* is a relaxing, very funny vacation from the current horrors of the cineplex. Its gags, as in a Jacques Tati film, are often small, sometimes off-handed. It's my privilege to recommend it to you.



Hollywood sucks the life out of *LXG*

Originally published July 17, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



ACTORS ADRIFT ON A SEA OF CGI: The cast of *LXG* in front of what may or may not be an actual backdrop.

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he *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* is a special effects extravaganza. Nearly every scene is predicated upon something supernaturally big, opulent, or athletic, so that it wasn't so very long ago that the film couldn't have existed in its present form. It wouldn't have been practical or affordable, or maybe even feasible. If you stripped this film of its effects, not even the platform upon which it was built would remain. Unplug the computer and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* disappears.

How is it? Who knows? You'd have to ask a member of its target audience, maybe a Goonies fan who experiences movies only as escapism and who's willing — or capable — of dismissing any other consideration. There's nothing wrong with that approach to film, it just doesn't provide for a very deep relationship with the form. But if you view *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* with any kind of critical thinking intact, it defeats you. The plot exists as its own end: plot for the sake of plot. The acting is all line-reading, except when the characters need to appear especially British, in which case it's smug and falsely cavalier. The cinematography is often underlit for the sake of atmosphere, or blandly professional in daylight sequences. And the art direction is Gothic gaudy, the great cities of Europe reduced to Tim Burton-derived copies of one another. Scenes in the canals of Venice might have been shot on the sets used for the *Seine in Paris*, except that I doubt that there were "sets," as we traditionally understand them, used for either. It's perhaps more accurate to say that the scenes might have been generated by the same software, and that its programmers had never visited either city.

The plot of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* tells of a group of characters from great British adventure novels — plus *Tom Sawyer* — who avert a world war at the dawn of the twentieth century. These characters, so alive in the novels from which they're culled, have nothing left in James Dale Robinson's screenplay except their special abilities, so that Mina from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* can become bats and Allan Quartermain is handy with a gun. (For those with a cultural memory, it's embarrassing when the plot shuts down so that the filmmakers can explain who Dorian Gray is. Oscar Wilde's original story is reworked so completely anyway that they may as well have just given him a different name and noted in voiceover that he can't age.)

I make the following observation every week, and I'm tired of it too, but the fact is that the action sequences in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* are incomprehensible; they're filmed too tight and edited like a music video, so that the only way to know what's happened is to wait for the dust to settle and see who's standing. It's a plague in Hollywood, and it's robbing action pictures of their fun. I find myself recommending *Hulk* and *Matrix Reloaded*, not because they're great pictures, but because the directors exhibit the ability to handle special effects in combination with a fistfight and let you know who won.

But as I said before, there must be an audience for these things or Hollywood would stop making them. When I was a boy, special effects were enough of a reason to see a film; if the previews showed a car flying, I went to the movie. (The trailer for 2001 showed both apes and spaceships, and the film was rated G, which meant "for kids". There are no words to express my six-year-old's boredom and disappointment with the epic of soulless pre-determinism I actually attended.)

Nowadays it seems it's hard to finance a movie that doesn't include special effects; it may be time to drop the "special." Now that cars routinely fly through the frame, it's time for Hollywood to wake up to the realization that plot and characters are needed, too, or else the result will be *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*: a hit at the box office for a week or two, and then a forgotten entry in *Maltin*, alongside *Flight of the Navigator* and *Young Sherlock Holmes*.



Spellbound simply spellbinding

Originally published July 10, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



M-O-V-I-E: *Spellbound* follows in the footsteps of eight contestants in a national spelling bee — and, believe it or not, the film packs more suspense than an army of Terminators.

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he new documentary *Spellbound* starts out with a small theme — the 72nd Annual Scripps-Howard Spelling Bee at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Washington, DC — but it expands as it goes until, by the end, it presents a hopeful overview of American life, and its simple premise has provided insights into all variety of American experience. The film, directed by Jeffrey Blitz, follows eight young contenders for the title of America's best speller, and by the end my

emotional investment in their struggles was so intense I thought I would cry as they were eliminated. It's a wonderful movie.

The structure of *Spellbound* is classical in its simplicity: In the first half of the film we're individually introduced to our eight kids in their family and school settings after they've qualified for the national bee, and in the second half we follow them through that competition. To say that the no-nonsense set-up is a relief after such shotgun-blast approaches as *Bowling for Columbine*'s is an understatement; in this far more relaxed environment, Blitz introduces the contenders deftly, including a rich amount of detail, and I don't think I'm exaggerating when I write that he actually ennobles these children in our eyes — elevates them from the geeks we suspect they'll be — in something like seven minutes per child.

His editing in the interview process is slyly ingenious. Meeting Harry, a boy who's so intelligent and so bursting with energy and ideas that you worry he might actually explode, Blitz maintains a careful balance between his precocity — this child chews the scenery like no other screen child in my experience — and the vulnerability you sense within his rabid desire to connect with the filmmakers he magically finds in his life. Harry craves the attention of any adult to the extent that in the actual competition he has to be encouraged to finish spelling his words since he knows that he'll then lose the momentary limelight. Once we've met Harry, we're introduced to his mother and it all becomes clear: She has the same wide grin, the same busy gestures, and the same energized spontaneity — although tempered by age — that we've just seen in her son.

Neil is another matter. In his segment, we see the boy, but the words we hear and the presence we most often see on the screen is that of his coach and father, a first-generation Indian immigrant. This man is driven, and although he pays lip service to the idea that to compete in the nationals is a victory in itself, it soon becomes clear that he's more invested in the competition than even his son. (At the finals a rumor circulates that Neil's father has paid a thousand people in India to pray and chant during the entire tournament. And it's a tense moment indeed when Neil draws the word "Darjeeling," derived from Bengali, and it looks as though he's going to flub it.) Neil's actual presence is felt very late in his segment; he's soft-spoken, maybe a little bit cowed, and you realize that the director has pointed out his father's domination without any overt sign.

And a word must be said about April. She mentions early on that her parents remind her of Archie and Edith Bunker, and go to hell if her mother doesn't appear a near double for Jean Stapleton. This woman futzes around the house, glasses dangling from a tacky lorgnette when they're not being worn half-way down her nose, and in an interview with her and her husband, the family dog comes in and affectionately stands licking her leg as she speaks. The effect is comical, but not demeaning; you're more likely to want to move in with April's family than find fault with their middle-class attitudes. April's father's vocation? He works across the street from an abandoned asbestos factory, proprietor of the Easy Street Pub.

Each of these children is unique and much care is taken to establish them first of all as human beings in our eyes. The details Blitz provide help enormously to establish the lives behind the children and the environments from which they emerge: In a farm setting, a cat lazes on the grass behind the interviewee; a child on a swing explains that, besides spelling, what she likes best is roller coasters; a Hooters employee, proud that a local girl named Nupur (another Indian-American) has made the nationals, posts a sign in front of the restaurant that says

CONGRADULATIONS.

Moving into the nationals, the film picks up a natural suspense as the children we've come to care about proceed — or don't — from round to round. The rules specify that a spoken letter cannot be retracted, and the scenes of contestants — and especially the eight children we've met — at the microphone are thus sometimes almost unbearably tense. I'm aware of what I'm saying here, that a spelling bee had me on the edge of my seat, but that's just how it happened; you could sense the tension throughout the auditorium. Many comic moments present themselves too, such as a child who blanches visibly when given the word "Chateaubriand" (it's not in my spell check) or a non-Catholic child receiving "banns" (a notice of intended marriage posted in a Catholic church) followed by a baffled Texas boy who is given the Jewish word "yenta" (from the Yiddish, a busybody). A contestant named Emily is given a word that I never understood in the first place; she clearly has never heard it before in her life, but she considers it awhile, asks about its etymology, and then spits out the most unlikely string of letters you've ever heard in your life (ending in something like "eau"). Correct.

And so it goes, up to and including the almost literally hair-raising conclusion. (In the closing sequence the film is edited for impact, and it has impact to spare.) The spelling bee is an American institution, stretching back to 1925, and *Spellbound* allows itself a little flag-waving in its powerful closing scenes. But what it celebrates about America is what's best about it: our diversity. Don't miss it.



28 Days Later is a scary downer

Originally published July 3, 2003

by [Jale Euker](#)



LIGHTS OUT IN LONDON: 28 Days Later offers real movie horror, but the film's bleak outlook is not what you'd call escapist fun.

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he end is fucking nigh" reads the graffito on the wall in the new zombie film 28 Days Later. There's truth in it, but it may apply more to the genre of the zombie film than the circumstances in the film to which it specifically refers.

In 1943, Jacques Tourneur gave us *I Walked with a Zombie* and voodoo and its accompanying horrors were brought to the public imagination. In 1968, George Romero took the zombies out of dark Haiti and set them loose in a grubby, everyday America, and the cheap mastery of what he accomplished birthed a franchise and inspired a myriad imitations.

Next the Italians took over, and they had a veritable zombie party; giallo filmmakers like Lucio Fulci cranked out countless zombie pieces — there were scores of them — and they had terrific titles like *Cannibal Apocalypse* and *Gates of Hell*. (*Gates of Hell*, by the way, provides one of my favorite moments in all of the long, fertile history of bad film: Christopher George, fresh from a smarmy *Playgirl* spread, and richly deserving it, gets de-brained from behind just as it looks like everything's clear.)

These zombies spread across the world, unified in their desire to eat human brains; they clamored

for it, they couldn't get enough. They didn't look too great for the obvious reason that they had already died. They moved sluggishly, as we imagine the dead would. And they had given up logical thought right about the time that the doctor said, "I'm sorry. There was nothing we could do."

But genres that don't progress die, and if you bring them back to life without offering something new, what you get is a zombie in its film version. (Look at what's happened to vampire films: In that genre, the stake has surely pierced the heart.) 28 Days Later takes as its premise a virus called Rage that infects humans quickly and spreads uncontrollably. Thus it is that the zombies offered us here aren't actually dead, they're just transformed into something no longer human. Whether or not they want to eat brains is unclear, although they clearly wish the uninfected harm. And, because they haven't yet died, they move with horrifying speed and they put up a fight if they catch you.

The premise is juicy, and it opens with promise: A young man awakens from a coma in a hospital to find himself seemingly alone in an eerily unpopulated London. These scenes are the highlight of the film; they recall the wonderful, undervalued sci-fi film *The Quiet Earth* of 1985, where a protagonist finds himself in a situation we've all imagined: Everyone's gone.

In 28 Days Later our hero Jim (played by Cillian Murphy) wanders the city, kicking through piles of souvenir Big Bens and drinking Pepsi from looted vending machines. The streets are silent, so that when a car alarm goes off it startles as much as a meteor would. There are no lights at night and no planes overhead. When Jim encounters his first zombie, it's legitimately terrifying, a burst of horror and movement in a setting of absolute stillness. He also encounters his first humans, who are living in a kiosk store; the film moves inside, and I'm sad to report that that's when the fun ends.

Danny Boyle, who directed here, and whose best-known film was the glossy, candy-bright *Trainspotting*, is to be saluted for the imagination he brings to 28 Days Later, and for his bravery in shooting the film digitally. The film's look is a world away from that of *Trainspotting*; everything here is grainy and loosely composed, and it bears no visual relationship to, say, the wind-up baby of *Trainspotting*, crawling along the ceiling in a plainly-observed, hallucinatory trance.

But the style of the film plays against it; after the sequence in the streets of London, the film moves to the kiosk store and then to a sinister, paramilitary compound called the 42nd blockade, and the ochre graininess of the images adds to the claustrophobia of the settings. And the film is shot so closely and edited so erratically — for immediacy, I assume — that many key action sequences are hopelessly muddled; in a climactic battle, for instance, I literally had no idea what was going on. (Could a great action sequence like the car chase in *Bullitt* be made today? Young directors can't resist inserting themselves into their material, almost always to the detriment of action. Tarantino can do it — he gives us a good look at what's going on, and he keeps the camera at a distance. But his imitators miss that one great thing about him, maybe the best thing about him, and their action scenes are too often a morass of confusion.)

28 Days Later's biggest fault lies in its tone. The humans here are embattled, and they're confined to a few dark, safe places. They have one motive — survival — and it overrides normal human considerations like affection and character. There's a love interest for Jim — Selena, played by

Naomie Harris — but she represents the single most cold-blooded love interest film has to offer, and she's conceived in the Sigourney Weaver Alien mode: She's a bitch. (Filmmakers, I'm happy to report, are increasingly abandoning the hysterical female stereotype, but if this is the only alternative they have to offer — the no-bullshit murderess who's been trained in commando technique — then they need to go back to the drawing board. I think we've all come to dislike this stock characterization even in the men.)

28 Days Later gives you someone to root for, but no one to trust, and, combined with the menacing, dark interiors and gritty images, the overall effect is one of insurmountable depression. Films can portray captives without holding the audience with them, but 28 Days Later doesn't find a way.

28 Days Later has a lot to offer. The zombies are a horror: They have blood-red eyes and their movements are violent and unpredictable. They emerge through things, so that you become uneasy any time a character stands before a curtain, a window, a door. And their appearances are telegraphed by a very brief point-of-view shot, so that you know they're on their way. There are memorable images, especially the empty streets of London and the burning of Manchester, which is panned up to slowly from a highway.

And many of the performances are good, especially Murphy's as Jim and the always wonderful Brendan Gleeson, who plays a naively hopeful father, and who gets a good, bloody send-off.

That being said, I didn't enjoy myself at the film, and I would certainly never agree to see it again. The point of a zombie film, or any horror film, is to give you a good scare and then send you on your way. But Boyle's vision has staying power, and even its ostensibly happy ending pales before the darkness that precedes it. Is there an audience, I wonder, for a film that leaves you feeling so dark inside, so uneasy and depressed? And where, after this admirable but failed experiment, does the zombie film go from here?



Katharine Hepburn: Great actress, good sport

Originally published July 3, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



THE GREAT KATE: Katharine Hepburn defied gender stereotypes, the Hollywood system, and death for nearly a century. She starred in numerous Broadway productions and in over 50 movies, including nine with Spencer Tracy, in a career that spanned seven decades. Ms. Hepburn died on Sunday at the age of 96.

I

was 19 years old and living in Lawrence with my roommates Liz and Jane when Katharine Hepburn called our home. I still have the article from the Eagle about it; Liz had worked for the Eagle, and we hung out with the news staff back then, and so what had begun as a personal moment became news: A Telephone Call from a Star. They printed my name as "Jake Buker."

The occasion was a surprise birthday party for our friend Angela, an aspiring actress, who was appearing in a college production of *Holiday* at the time of the big event. Trying to think of something special for her party, one of us remembered reading that Ms. Hepburn was in rehearsals for a Broadway production; since Angela was playing the part that the older actress had made famous in the film version, it only seemed sensible to us to send a telegram to the New York play's director — his name had been given in the article and his number was listed — and ask him to ask Ms. Hepburn to give Angela a call during the party. I remember specifying that charges for a collect call would be accepted.

This was in 1981, and back then, having just moved away from our homes, and having met people who listened to the same music we did and who wore duct tape for clothing, and having learned in our art history courses about teacups lined with fur and art pieces that consisted of walking from one British city to another — back then we honestly believed that anything might

happen. We would all be famous, Angela included; it was inevitable. The world would see. And surely Katharine Hepburn would call our apartment and wish Angela a happy birthday. Why wouldn't she?

We'd forgotten all about it that night by the time the telephone rang. We were all pretty drunk by then, and Angela was still struggling to accommodate the gift of a horrible bird in a cage that she clearly didn't want and which had been purchased for her at Woolworth's.

I wish I could say that it ended happily, but Angela, receiving a personal call from a screen legend, and having no idea that it might happen, refused to believe that it was Katharine Hepburn she was speaking to. "Who is this really?" she kept asking, so that my friend Freedy and I actually had to run from the apartment, not being able to think of any other channel for our horror and embarrassment. We showed Angela the telegram afterwards, and I'm sad to report that we then phoned the New York director, he said something like, "Do you have any idea what time it is here?" (It was 2 a.m.) He at least agreed to forward a message expressing our regret.

Katharine Hepburn became one of the patron celebrities of our Lawrence youth. (The other was Henry Rollins, who cost us a portion of our security deposit by drawing the Black Flag rectangles on our bathroom wall.) That's part of the reason I was sad to see that she had died last week, at age 96; who could forget a kindness like that phone call? How few are the celebrities who would take the time? The other reason, of course, is that she was who she was: a singular talent and, for many decades, a uniquely strong voice for women on the silver screen.



New DVD Pick O' The Week: *by Brakhage*

Originally published June 26, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



T

he word "experimental" gets thrown around a lot when people are talking about film. Usually what is meant, really, is "unconventional;" *Eraserhead* is an example of a film described often enough as being experimental that, while certainly unusual, follows the usual dictates about narrative and character, and that achieves a picture in the usual way: by filming it.

When Stan Brakhage died earlier this year, at the age of 70, America lost her most lasting and most eloquent proponent of alternative methods in film. Brakhage was that rarity: a dyed-in-the-wool, intractable advocate of the use of film for other than narrative purposes, and the body of work he left behind is the real thing: true-blue experiment. He was a national treasure, largely unsung. A collection of 26 of his most enduring works, entitled *By Brakhage*, has just been released on DVD.

Brakhage's techniques were various. When using a traditional camera, he swung it wildly, or over- or under-exposed his footage, or shot it out of focus. He scratched or painted directly onto the film. When shooting traditional action, he closed in on things until they were rendered abstract, or used editing to confuse the temporal order of events.

The results were sometimes silly, but sometimes the experiment connected in a way that narrative film never could, and it is those moments, and the way they make you respond almost preconsciously, that Brakhage will be remembered for.

The typical Brakhage piece is short. (The shortest in the collection is nine seconds long.) But *By Brakhage* includes his epic *Dog Star Man*, filmed between 1961 and 1964, clocking in at 74 minutes. *Dog Star Man* feels like the lost American masterpiece it probably is; it's big and

ambitious, it exhibits an almost beatnik sensibility and it's often sensuously beautiful. Dog Star Man is the centerpiece of the collection, but lots of other delights (and some misses) await the patient viewer.

Brakhage was an artist with discipline, and he didn't construct his films randomly. Among his influences he listed everyone from Ezra Pound (a major influence) to Messiaen (a minor one). Is it there? Not really. It could be that only Brakhage could spot the Chaucer influence in a film bearing his name.

These films stand as a crazy, yet solid, monument in an ever-less-artful art form. They're beautiful, vivid, and alive and kicking on the screen.



A strangely hilarious apocalypse

Originally published June 19, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT: Swedish director Roy Andersson made the leap from TV commercials to surreal apocalyptic black comedy with *Songs from the Second Floor*.

T

he new Swedish comedy *Songs from the Second Floor* opens with a business meeting, recorded with an unmoving camera, in which a CEO is explaining to one of his managers that more cutbacks will be necessary for their firm to remain solvent. These cutbacks, he explains, will have to be in personnel; they'll have to fire more people. Things are bad, very bad, the CEO explains. In fact, the CEO foresees a day very soon when the game will be lost for people like himself and the manager. It will be over. The economy is stranded. Capitalism has failed.

"What will we do?" his manager asks.

"Then we will not be here," the CEO replies. "What's the point of staying where there is only a lot of misery?"

There's something a little wrong with this scene, as there is in every scene of *Songs from the Second Floor*. In this instance, the action is shot in a health club, bathed in sickly fluorescent light. The overweight manager is wheezing, standing awkwardly in his suit with his briefcase, and he's having to squat and yell a little because the CEO is enclosed within a tanning bed so that all we see of him is his feet. The manager looks like the fat bird from *Shoe*. He's come to a business meeting, but the CEO is naked in a fluorescent tomb and behind him men are diving into a swimming pool. The CEO's voice emerges disembodied, as it would from an intercom.

"Shouldn't I wait outside?" the manager cries uneasily at the tanning bed.

"I'm leaving for Barcelona at three," comes the voice from the glowing tomb.

So it is with *Songs from the Second Floor*: Nothing is quite as expected and every encounter is tinged with the absurd. The film comprises fifty-odd tableaux — I detected camera movement only once — in which a carefully composed shot reveals an ever-mounting surrealism, and hysteria is barely contained within blank Scandic gazes. (Panic buzzes beneath the surface of this film the way the horrible lighting buzzes overhead.) These tableaux are like the paintings of someone like Eric Fischl — they're charged with the memory or the promise of some bizarre human interaction, except that there's movement contained within them. (Although sometimes the joke is that no one moves for uncomfortable intervals.) And they're linked together like the paintings in a career retrospective; the scenes pick up the same themes and characters, but they move the plot in unexpected or barely related directions, with the result that you have no idea — no idea at all — what might happen next.

The theme here is the millennial end of society. *Songs from the Second Floor* portends this end with mysterious traffic jams that last for days and for which no cause can be found, by parades of self-flagellants who take to the streets with whips and hump-backed gaits, by board meetings attended by panicked management who have invited a fortuneteller; she passes around a crystal ball. That's the plot: The end is near. But as *Songs from the Second Floor* progresses it marches steadfastly into the surreal, so that by the end of the film the dead have arisen, madmen think they've spotted Jesus, and, in a set piece worthy of Godard, the capitalists have fled the country en masse, struggling to wrangle giant luggage carts to which they've strapped every portable

thing they own.

The plot, as I say, is nebulous. But the film gives us recurring characters (many of whom, in a daring but successful gambit, look a lot alike; the businessmen, for instance, are, without exception, pasty, well-fed visions of the gluttonous bourgeoisie). Of particular importance is a father who's torched his business, and his son, who has gone mad from writing poetry; a magician who botches a trick in which he attempts to saw an audience volunteer in half; a half-wit, senile general, confined to a crib, who happens to be the richest man in the country; and the aforementioned manager who, while the world crumbles around him, frets about the loss of a golf club. (His boyfriend, watching the traffic jam from the window, off-handedly naked from the waist down, keeps assuring him that a replacement can be found.)

Songs from the Second Floor is unlike any movie I've ever seen. (It's also one of the funniest, and it certainly ranks among the strangest.) Its singular conception is the work of Roy Andersson, who wrote and directed, and who comes to *Songs from the Second Floor* from a background in, of all things, television commercials. (No less an authority than Ingmar Bergman recently declared him the best maker of commercials ever; take a minute to consider that.) Andersson spent four years on this film, and it shows in his meticulous staging and unerring composition, and his experience in commercials shows in the way that the scenes tend to be complete in themselves; many of the film's vignettes could stand alone as short works. Andersson used mostly non-professional actors; while the performances in themselves are nothing special (with the decided exception of Hasse Sderholm as the general; you can't believe he's acting and not actually far adrift in senility), the performers present a unified front of blankness and uncertainty, and they add another unsettling dimension to the overall vision of the film. They become a component of what's so great and strange about it, as if performers were, like camera placement, just another element to be manipulated in a scene.

Songs from the Second Floor is a gleeful attack on capitalist values, but it never loses its objective cool, and at least half of what Andersson presents here is unimaginably rich in comic detachment. While the reviews it's received since its initial release in 2000 have been overwhelmingly positive, some critics have objected to the film's ironic tone. Is that fair? I'm not sure, because while the film is indeed detached, it's also so obviously a labor of love — with emphasis on the labor — that you sense the director's excitement in presenting it and his tenuous fondness for what he's achieved. Andersson wants you to love his work; he's not indifferent to his audience as so many high-concept artists are. And with his background in advertising, he has the tools to make every scene connect. He's made a kind of a masterpiece, although it's a very specific kind, and he's dying to share it with you. Shouldn't we be encouraging this lone voice, howling out its message of comic wrath from the cold wilderness of the boardroom?



***Nemo* is magical, funny and beautiful**

Originally published June 12, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



DON'T TOUCH THAT!: Characters in Pixar's *Finding Nemo* learn that while jellyfish are beautiful, they are also potentially deadly.

O

ne of the interesting things about Pixar's *Toy Story* was that there were no dads. There were moms all over the place, but the only father figures in that film were a stuffed cowboy and a plastic astronaut.

Now, eight years later, in the new Pixar release *Finding Nemo*, we've come full circle: no moms.

There are females among the fish portrayed in the film, but none of them is capable of mothering; one is a nut named Dory with a short-term memory disorder, another is a nut who pretends to fill a mother role, but who also believes that her reflection is her sister Flo. And the true villain of the piece is a horrid little human girl whose mouth bristles with orthodontic appliances and who taps on aquariums and shakes bagged fish.

I'm not complaining; *Finding Nemo* is a terrific entertainment, the best wide-release animation since the heyday of Wallace and Gromit (and there are a couple of valentines to that pair thrown into the film). But you can't help noticing it. What does it mean?

Finding Nemo tells the story of a father/son team of clown fish whose peaceful life in an anemone on a reef is disrupted when the son (the Nemo of the title, voiced by Alexander Gould) is caught by a scuba-diving dentist and installed in the office aquarium in far-away Sydney. Nemo's nervous father Marlin (nervously voiced by Albert Brooks) sets out into the open ocean to find him, while Nemo, who knows his father is looking for him, plots his escape from the

aquarium.

It's kind of a double feature in one film: Marlin's story recalls every rescue film from *The Searchers* to *Hardcore*, while Nemo's is a classic piece of prison-break filmmaking. (It even includes a scarred lifer, Gill, who goes into solitary when one of his plans goes bad.) Both sides of the story are richly conceived, so that it's not a drag to be pulled from one to the other; you never feel the action shutting down.

On Nemo's end you have a surfeit of comic supporting characters (there are so many good ideas and funny lines here that you struggle to catch them all), while Marlin's adventures have an episodic, magic feel. (The ocean is portrayed like the Tulgey Wood; it's dark and really enchanted, and you feel that anything might happen.)

Finding Nemo is, in a way, an act of privilege.

Although Pixar is affiliated with Disney, the company has managed to maintain artistic control of its material (the fact that every one of their feature films has been a smash at the box office has made this possible), and it thus is spared the homogenizing process that other animated features — or, for that matter, most other features, period — go through. It hasn't yet been made to be falsely "inclusive" the way Disney features now are, or to tone down the outrageousness in their humor, or to hire a songwriting team to bathe everything in saccharine. The enormously talented artistic team on *Finding Nemo* — directors Andrew Stanton and Lee Unkrich, writers Bob Peterson and David Reynolds, and producer Steve Lasseter — is a similar line-up to the one that brought us *Toy Story*, and their ideas reach the screen undiluted.

When people talk about *Finding Nemo*, they say, "It's not really a kids' film," or, "It's for adults, too," and I think that's what they're getting at. The creators of this film are cracking themselves up first, the way the Warner Bros. animators did in Bugs Bunny's golden age, and you end up with a product that's not for kids or adults, but for anyone with a sense of humor.

Thus it is that *Finding Nemo* is filled to exploding with memorable bits, true laughs (some of which seem like Terry Gilliam's work; Dory says in her sleep, "Are you going to eat that?" and then, "That monkey fish has my money"), and good action sequences.

It's gorgeous, too, especially in the ocean; in one scene Marlin traverses a school of soft, pink jellyfish that we know to be deadly, and they're beautiful and terrifying all at once.

The villains, in general, come off well. The film features a lamp fish with a mesh of razor teeth that I'll never forget, and a trio of loutish but well-meaning sharks whose ominous heads fill the screen. And in a play on the crane machine joke in *Toy Story*, there's a hilarious flock of seagulls that are all identical and that behave like the aliens in the first movie; am I making it up, or is there a UFO joke here, too?

Finding Nemo has its flaws. Marlin and Nemo, for instance, have a white-bread conception that's not really very imaginative, and Nemo is given a truncated fin that never really plays into the plot — it just seems a little weird. There's a school of surfer-dude sea turtles I could have lived without. Still, it's a wonderfully entertaining film, and I can recommend it to anyone. The fact that it's animated — and beautifully animated at that — isn't a liability for adults. (Parts of it are

as "realistic" as the new "live action" Matrix film; drop the "m" from "Nemo" and you've got it.) The animation, in this case, is just another reason to go.



Deliver us from *Bruce*

Originally published May 29, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)

W

hen the movie *Street Smart* came out in 1987, critics like Pauline Kael were speculating that Morgan Freeman may have been the greatest actor at work in American movies. The movie wasn't much, but he was; his performance as a ruthless pimp was slyly menacing, sublime.

If he could bring a crappy movie like *Street Smart* to life, what could he do with a real script? He seemed like an actor with limitless potential and he fulfilled it — for awhile.

But great power, in Hollywood, breeds great egos, and by the time *The Shawshank Redemption* rolled around, he had already been sainted. His role in that film — a salt-of-the-earth, fatherly dispenser of wisdom and simple truths — left some of us in the audience wondering what he possibly could have been imprisoned for — it was like locking up Santa Claus.

His performance was a grotesque harbinger of things to come: He was a Big Star and a kindly father figure, and his appearance alone in a film was enough.

After the self-congratulatory horrors of *Shawshank*, the situation worsened: he appeared in *Outbreak*, *Chain Reaction*, *Amistad*, *Deep Impact* (as the president), and a lot more, and his

performances were tacitly beyond reproach. How could you object to this saintly, sane, humane statesman of the screen?

By playing God in the horrible new film *Bruce Almighty*, he has fulfilled a destiny. But the wrong one: He's gone from being a great actor to a great sell-out. Worse, I think he believes his own hype, that his hallowed presence — his understanding nods, his sympathetic, deep looks, his simple-man charm — is somehow to be taken as a performance.

Morgan Freeman has become one of the very worst things a Hollywood actor can be: the actor as stand-in moral compass, a high-paid, self-satisfied, Tinseltown God.

That's the best joke in *Bruce Almighty*, and it is not, of course, an intentional one.

There have been some very funny screen Gods. When Sir Ralph Richardson appears as God at the end of *Time Bandits*, he's like a fussy manager who instructs his subjects to tidy up. Alanis Morissette, in *Dogma*, was a flower-child God, too incomprehensible in her divine wisdom to do much more on-screen than ogle flowers and coo, like a half-wit eight-year-old whose powers defied reason.

Freeman's God, when not disguised as a janitor or a homeless man (because in Hollywood, prisoners, janitors, homeless men, space aliens and retarded children are present to teach us life's simple lessons), wears a monochromatic suit and dispenses unbearable homilies. When he's describing the moral rightness of manual labor to his apprentice, he says, "There's freedom in it," and I wanted to spray vomit on the screen. You just about have to be a starving actor or Morgan Freeman to agree to deliver that line, but who do you have to be to write it?

The screenwriters here are Steve Koren, Mark O'Keefe, and Steve Oedekerk (his last film, besides Frankentumb, was Kung Pow: Enter the Fist). They had, or were given, an idea: that a news reporter named Bruce Nolan, feeling rejected by God because he was passed over for an anchorman spot, meets the Big Man Himself and is given all of His powers for a time, to see if he can do a better job.

There is a way, I think, to do this kind of thing without turning your movie into cheese on the screen, but these men didn't find it, and Bruce Almighty ends with a chastened hero submitting to God's will and winning back the woman he lost during his egocentric, God-like stage.

Worse, though, is the fact that the screenwriters can't find anything funny for Bruce — who can do anything — to do. His powers are used to housebreak his dog and win back the anchor position, and that's about it. His aspirations apparently end at reading the news in Buffalo every evening, to the extent that he doesn't even fly or become invisible.

He drives to work.

The dearth of imagination in Bruce Almighty is stupefying. He's no Faust, and Goethe, were he brought back from the dead to view it, would probably choose to die again.

None of this necessarily matters in a star vehicle, because in the hands of a great comedian any material can suffice. (W. C. Fields, for instance, was barely given a plot.)

But I ask you, is Jim Carrey that great comedian? To say he's the new Jerry Lewis is too obvious, although both have a similar spastic energy in their physical comedy, and they divide the audience into similar love/hate camps.

Carrey performs with abandon; he's willing to do anything for a laugh, so that his whole physical and mental being becomes a tool for his comedy.

It's not possible, for instance, to see him as being sexual or sympathetic or any of the other things we look for in a screen performer, because he's always willing to betray those feelings to reach for a gag.

It's funny sometimes, but it's scary, too (and it works best with the Farrelly Brothers, who are as tasteless and unhinged as he is).

In *Bruce Almighty*, he's cast as a romantic hero and, reined in by romantic conventions, he's alternately embarrassing to watch and terrifyingly detached. When he prepares a romantic evening for his girlfriend (played by Jennifer Aniston), you feel both baffled by her attraction to him — who could want to sleep with this rubbery 13-year-old? Is it lawful? — and worried for her physical safety.

Embarrassment wins out, and in the end you find it hard to look at the screen for many long stretches of *Bruce Almighty*.

The necessary scenes addressing the characters' theologies, in particular, are hard to watch; you feel bad for Aniston when she has to sincerely deliver a line such as "Do you think God is

picking on you?" and for a minute it feels like you're in one of those creepy Christian thrillers, like *Left Behind* or *Brigham City*, that show up on the video shelves like furtively-left tracts.

There is one funny sequence in the film, but it's not Carrey's; when Steven Carell, as the rival newscaster, is on-air, Carrey turns him into a jabbering freak, and Carell's delivery, if that's the word for it, draws the film's one real laugh.

If there is a God, *Bruce Almighty* will die pretty quickly at the boxoffice, although it would take a miracle to keep this lazy, misconceived effort from recouping its losses on video.

After I saw it, I had a second look at *Adaptation* — and there in the previews was Morgan Freeman, playing a character named Preacher in the upcoming *Levity*. I wanted to go blind. Addressing a convicted murderer, to whom, I assume, he will teach life's simple lessons, Freeman says, "I don't need you to believe. Just to come in." To the theaters? Because that would pretty well sum up his career.

Amen.



***Down with Love* a charmer**

Originally published May 22, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)

D

own with Love is a bright and very funny comedy that pays tribute to the kind of late '50s/early

'60s romantic comedy typified by films like *That Touch of Mink* and *Pillow Talk*. These films were produced in vivid Technicolor and Cinemascope, usually for Universal, and they likely starred Doris Day opposite a suave leading man like Rock Hudson or Jim Garner. The critics didn't exactly send roses, but the films were a hit with audiences, and you have to be a killjoy not to enjoy them now that their once-racy double entendre and sly sex jokes have been rendered coy by *Last Tango in Paris* and all that followed.

Down with Love manages to recreate a filmmaking style that was practically a parody of itself in the first place. Part of what made these films so fun, besides their naughtiness, was their cartoon conception of life in the jet set of New York City (New York figured in nearly all of these films), where cocktails were served at board meetings and the streets along Madison Avenue were dotted with mahogany-paneled bars and grills. Style is everything in a film like *The Thrill of It All*, and the interiors and wardrobes were knockout examples of chic at a time when the world really was a white American's oyster.

Down with Love, like the films that inspired it, has as its theme the battle of the sexes. It's essentially the same plot, with the same ending, as, say, *The Wheeler Dealers*, but the details are switched out, as they always were; here, an attractive Maine authoress (Renée Zellweger) arrives in New York to promote her book *Down with Love*, a kind of proto-feminist manifesto teaching women how to enjoy sex "à la carte," as men do, without bothering with love and commitment, and thus make their way up in the world. When her book becomes a bestseller and women do indeed start leaving the ironing to the men, it becomes the task of a dashing playboy writer (Ewan McGregor) to expose her as a poseur and restore the balance of power between the sexes. And the only way he can do that, of course, is to make her fall in love with him.

A 5-year-old could see how this will end, and the filmmakers let it take its course without messing up the schematic. In most genre parodies — like the Austin Powers films or *Undercover Brother* — the filmmakers rely on irony for their laughs, but there's not a lot of that here. *Down with Love* is so true to its source that most of what appears on the screen would have made it past the censors even then. (The film, in fact, is least successful when it's mocking; a joke about how people smoke anywhere, even in the elevator, sticks out because it's out of place.)

Down with Love is so perfectly conceived visually that you almost expect to see scratches in the film. The film is furnished in bright primaries in the workplace, blues and wood tones at the bachelor pad, and pinks whenever a woman is present. The costumes, by Daniel Orlandi, are hilariously right — they might have appeared in the originals — but they're not overdone. The film is set in 1962 (the same year, but a world away, from the San Francisco of *American Graffiti*), and New York has obviously changed since then, but the filmmakers compensate ingeniously with back projection and exaggerated skyline models. It recalls the Looney Tunes cartoons of that era (people who don't know the films upon which *Down with Love* is based will still feel the nostalgia because they'll feel the Bugs Bunny connection), and its score is used as the scores were in those cartoons: to punch up the jokes. Even the cinematography, by Jeff Cronenweth, is period; when the camera prowls the floor to avoid recording a steamy kiss, it's a joke about every clothes-and-undergarment trail you've ever seen on film.

But *Down with Love*'s most triumphant period coup is in its casting. As the heroine, Zellweger is charming and just right, and she has the exact ambitious-but-vulnerable quality that all of those

scripts required. She and her co-stars have done their homework and, for her, it shows in the way she flaps her hands as she talks, and the way she puckers her mouth into a bright red, heart-shaped pout. At times — especially while agitated or wearing a turban — her physical resemblance to Doris Day is almost alarming.

As the playboy, McGregor has the charm he needs to carry the role and win the girl. (Traditionally the male lead in these films could go one of two ways: square-jawed American, like Rock Hudson, or sophisticated man of the world, like Tony Randall, and McGregor was obviously cast in the latter mold.) His character name is Catcher Block, and his character matches it: He has a stylized walk, he wears houndstooth, and he arrives by helicopter in his first scene. For a part of the film, this character masquerades as an astronaut, and McGregor gives him a Texas accent that sounds eerily like Huckleberry Hound's.

David Hyde Pierce plays McGregor's publisher and bumbling best friend. His performance is a kind of comic miracle; I can't describe it except to say that he appears to be channeling Major Healy from *I Dream of Jeannie* and every other awkward-in-love sidekick who's ever appeared on a screen. It's supernatural. Sarah Paulson is likewise extraordinary as Zellweger's editor and best friend — Hyde Pierce's counterpart — and when these two gifted comedians are on-screen together, everything they do — finish a drink, look away, catch an elevator — becomes part of what's so funny about their characters.

There's visual wit in every frame of *Down with Love*, but the film has verbal wit, too, and the cast is gifted enough to wring every laugh they can from it. (Zellweger has a speech at the end — it must be at least a four-minute uninterrupted take — that's an amazing comic monologue.) The director, Peyton Reed, comes to *Down with Love* from a background of work in television, and for once that might be an advantage: The film depends on its get-to-the-punchline timing. These films, in their heyday, were conceived of in part as a way of luring viewers away from their TVs: They were sexier than the networks allowed, and they were shot in Cinemascope as a way of giving viewers the option of a bigger picture and more cheesy-opulent images. But essentially they were TV material; they were like *Bewitched*, only smarter and bigger, and they needed a big screen to look their shiniest and best. *Down with Love* is smarter still — it has to be to work — but, like its '60s counterparts, it benefits from its scale. See it on the big screen.



A Mighty Wind: A gentle breeze

Originally published May 15, 2003

by [Jason Bailey](#)



FLAKY FLASHBACK: Eugene Levy and Catherine O'Hara portray aging folkies (and ex-lovers) in the latest Christopher Guest mockumentary, *A Mighty Wind*. The film also stars Guest, Michael McKean, Parker Posey, Fred Willard and Ed Begley, Jr.

T

he world will be a better place if Christopher Guest and his friends continue making a movie every couple of years, and his latest film, *A Mighty Wind*, is low-key, funny, and even a bit more likable than his previous efforts.

Guest again works in the style of the semi-improvised "mock documentary" developed by director Rob Reiner for *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984), which starred Guest, Michael McKean and Harry Shearer.

Guest returned to the genre in 1996 with the brilliant *Waiting For Guffman* (for my money, his best film to date), and followed that up with 2000's *Best In Show* (which, interestingly, was retitled *Dog Show!* in Japan. Sorry, didn't mean to digress ...)

His new film is an affectionate look at the '60s folk scene, centering around a tribute concert for the recently-deceased manager of three of the era's biggest acts.

Guest, McKean, and Shearer play the Folksmen, a Kingston Trio-esque group that spends a lot of time in polite argument.

John Michael Higgins (Show's flamboyantly gay Scott Donlan) leads the New Main Street Singers, who are first seen performing at an amusement park as a roller coaster roars behind them.

The priceless Eugene Levy and Catherine O'Hara are Mitch and Mickey, the folk-era sweethearts whose romance went more than a little sour. Levy and Guest (who "co-wrote," which for these films involves drafting an outline and letting the actors go) make the interesting choice of playing the Mitch and Mickey story fairly straight (although Levy, playing Mitch as a drugged-out basket case, gets laughs by merely appearing onscreen). Even more interesting is how well this works within the film, leading to — shocker — a couple of genuinely moving moments.

The gentler tone of *A Mighty Wind* makes it a nicer movie than its predecessors, but not a funnier one. I suppose it's a classic case of laughing with people instead of at them, and while I never stopped smiling through its 87 minutes, there weren't as many uproarious moments as I've come to expect — though I still laughed more here than at any of the so-called comedies I've seen this year.

Guest's cast is extensive, featuring a gallery of actors from the three previous films, and one of *A Mighty Wind*'s few flaws is that its large cast and brief running time give short shrift to some favorites. (Parker Posey's role seems something of an afterthought; Larry Miller also seems woefully underused.)

The Spinal Tap trio are clearly comfortable together, and their genuine distaste for the cult-like Main Street Singers is a comic possibility that isn't mined quite enough for my money.

Higgins and Jane Lynch (Show's lesbian dog trainer) are uproariously plastic, and Levy and O'Hara are as good as they've ever been.

Much as he did in *Best In Show*, Fred Willard swoops in just as things are slowing down with another of his dimwitted loudmouths, and steals scenes by the handful.

Jennifer Coolidge (aka Stifler's mom) is a scream as a PR woman with a weird accent and the brain of a hamster, though I could've used a little more of her as well.

Movies like *A Mighty Wind* aren't easy to review. It's simple enough to run down the gags that land (like Shearer's exit line of the Folksmen's set, or the final line of the title song, one of the most well-earned punchlines of any recent comedy), or which performances work, but the hardest thing to nail is the movie's biggest asset, which is its tone.

It's an easygoing little movie, mining its laughs from rich characters and believable situations instead of bodily functions and convoluted plot mechanics. It promises some laughs and delivers them.

Like Guest's other films, it also feels like the kind of movie that improves on repeat visits.

It's not the best film they've made, but it'll certainly do for now.



Holes good, *Daddy Day Care* bad

Originally published May 15, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



KIDS' MOVIES ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL: The young cast of *Holes* (above) have the good fortune to be in a well-made, engaging family film. The young cast of *Daddy Day Care* (below), on the other hand, are not so lucky.



M

y advice is to beat your children rather than take them to the new Eddie Murphy movie *Daddy Day Care*.

It's so bad it doesn't merit discussion; I didn't even realize that the premise — two men opening a day care — was supposed to be funny until about half way through.

The children in attendance were shrieking and walking around the theater and those adults who remained awake must have been as bored as I was.

I walked.

Life is only so long, you know?

I couldn't take any more fart jokes or drab, pastel art direction.

I went into another theater where the film had started half an hour earlier just to see how it ended. But I was too late; the credits were rolling and the aisles were filled with leaving patrons who had been transformed by magical Hollywood cynicism into the walking dead.

It's not unusual for kids to get sold short at the movies.

"Family" movies have a built-in audience — parents and the children they're desperate to keep entertained — and the studios know this. Why sink any effort into a film that's likely to rake in a

fortune in rentals regardless of its jaded content?

When some effort is made, it's likely to take the form of a franchise, as in the Harry Potter films, and that's just another form of exploitation.

It's rare to see a family film with some talent in it that doesn't also cost you a fortune in merchandise.

Good moviemaking isn't what I expected when I left *Daddy Day Care* and ventured, out of desperation, into *Holes*, and I'm as surprised as you are to be reporting that it's one of the better major releases I've seen this year. (Last week my friend Jason Bailey had some things to say about the trailer in his column here, and every word he told you was true; thus the desperation.)

Holes is engaging, generous, and well-paced. Its director, Andrew Davis, manages not to talk down to his audience, and he provides magic where it's needed and a palpable sense of place.

Where *Daddy Day Care* is a lame string of unfunny sketches, *Holes* is inventively plotted (it's based on the Louis Sachar novel) and its coincidences and crazy mysticism pull you in the way the best of children's fiction does.

The story follows Stanley Yelnats IV (his name, like everything else in the film, is a little bit of a trick: a palindrome), who, because of a 150-year-old curse on his family, is wrongly imprisoned at a dusty Texas correctional camp for boys.

His job, and the job of all the other boys at the camp, is to dig holes every day in the blistering sun.

There's a reason for this, of course, and the revelations Stanley makes ultimately liberate the boys at the camp, resolve the family curse, solve a couple murders, provide an answer to the problem of foot odor, and make young Stanley a hero.

It's a lot; I'm not even going into the subplot of the Old West murderess here, or the fattening of a pig, told in flashback, that ruined Stanley's grandfather, or the basketball star whose shoes are stolen from a charity auction. But the film uses visual cues and magic talismans (the appearance of onions, for instance, is key to the plot) to hold the whole thing together, and you can enjoy it even if you miss some details.

Holes, obviously, is directed at a young audience (thus the appearance of characters named Armpit, X-Ray, Zero, etc.), but it's not a chore for adults.

Jon Voight, playing the scary, hick director of the prison camp, is worth the price of admission alone. He pulls out every stop: He squints, he walks bow-legged, he spits and yowls. He draws his gun quite a bit, always swearing that he wasn't actually going to shoot a child; we in the audience are not reassured. It's a blast to watch him, and any time he's on screen it's a stinging rebuke to Eddie Murphy and his giant paycheck.

The cast is huge, and there's plenty more talent on hand: Shia LaBeouf as Stanley, Tim Blake Nelson as the smilingly-evil camp counselor, Sigourney Weaver (maybe too likable) as the

warden, Siobhan Fallon, immensely entertaining as Stanley's mom.

And the film looks good; you remember shots, such as an aerial view of the camp in which the ground is dotted with holes that stretch on forever, a pair of kids being swarmed by spooky yellow lizards, an oasis perched on the peak of a mountain that's shaped like a thumb.

Holes has holes. It's not perfect, but it is an honest effort at kids' entertainment, and I applaud its makers. If you're looking for something for the kids I recommend it.

As for *Daddy Day Care*, those assholes owe me seven bucks.



X2 a sequel to rival the original

Originally published May 8, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



DON'T MESS WITH A MAD MUTANT: Sir Ian McKellen as Magneto (above, left) busts out of his plastic prison with a little help from the shape-shifting Mystique (below), played by Rebecca Romjin-Stamos.





IT'S CLOBBERIN' TIME!!!: OK, so that's The Thing's catchphrase, but it seems appropriate here, as Wolverine (Hugh Jackman) pops open a Tall Boy of whup-ass in X2: X-Men United.

I

f you're casting a gigantic sci-fi extravaganza nowadays, the first thing you're going to need is a British knight.

I don't mean a character who's a British knight, I mean an actual Knight Commander of the Royal British Empire. Sir Alec Guinness in the Star Wars films, Sir Richard Attenborough in Jurassic Park, Sir Richard Harris in Harry Potter, Sir Ralph Richardson in Dragonslayer and Time Bandits, Sir Ian McKellen in Lord of the Rings — all these men have to do is show up on the set to give a picture instant pedigree. And, seeing as how they're British and a little older, they're every casting agent's default choice when a wizard is required.

"He actually got his start doing Shakespeare," the director can earnestly report to Entertainment Tonight. Does nobility intimidate its younger directors, I wonder, or do seven-figure salaries compensate for class insecurities? Did Chris Columbus get butterflies at the prospect of telling Sir Richard that he needed to be in make-up at 4 a.m.?

The way I see it, sci-fi movies have become a kind of Social Security for knights and, because they usually really did get their start doing Shakespeare, the knights can have a relaxed good time doing it.

In X2 it's Ian McKellen again, reprising his role as Magneto from the original X-Men, the mutant

whose answer to the problem of discrimination against his type is to eliminate his antagonists: the human race.

He's the bad guy, but not the worst; the worst is General Stryker (Brian Cox), an unscrupulous warmonger whose answer to the same problem is to eliminate the mutants. Both are intolerant, but at least Magneto has an excuse: The humans started it.

In X-Men, the problem was how to contain the violent rebels within the mutant community.

In X2, with General Stryker stirring the pot, and Magneto safely imprisoned in a huge hermetic cell, the problem is how to keep a war between humans and mutants at bay.

Bryan Singer, the director of both X-Men pictures, has an obvious affinity with this material, and he brings to X2 a scale that's almost operatic; it rivals both the outbreak of WWI and The Ring of the Nibelungen in complexity, and Singer's staging and his set pieces within the film are big.

He doesn't want to leave anything out, so there's a lot of plot and a lot of characters and a lot of back story about the characters' lives, but there's also a lot of attention to their motivations and individual personalities. (He might have had several movies here; the climax alone, which stretches on for at least half an hour, could have been a film in itself.)

The Lord of the Rings films are examples of movies with a similar complexity, but, where those films seem to survey the action out of a sense of duty, X2 is motivated by a love of the action and characters. It's chaotic sometimes, and parts of it drag. But the affection shows, and it's a relief to feel the director's enthusiasm. It gives you a contact high.

X2 is well-populated; it's like a Gosford Park set in a Marvel comic book.

There's a whole array of mutants on view here, and Singer and his screenwriters have the good graces to linger on the abilities of each and to let them all have a part of the action. Returning from the first film are Magneto, Storm (Halle Berry), Wolverine (Hugh Jackman), Rogue (Anna Paquin), Cyclops (James Marsden), Jean Grey (Famke Janssen), wicked Mystique (Rebecca Romijn-Stamos), and, of course, the group's spiritual leader, Professor Xavier (Patrick Stewart — a shoo-in for eventual knighthood himself). New (or of new importance) to the corps are Nightcrawler (Alan Cumming), Pyro (Aaron Stanford), and Iceman (Shawn Ashmore).

These mutants are conceived garishly.

Mystique, for instance, with her cobalt skin and bright yellow eyes, might have been inspired by a South American toad, but the tackiness of her conception becomes part of what's enjoyable about the film. (You could say the same about Romijn-Stamos's performance; she's almost all come-on, but it's not a cold come-on and you want to like her all the same.)

A stand-out among them is Alan Cumming; as Nightcrawler, he enjoys a similar color scheme to Mystique, but he's a nut, and Cumming is all the time dicking around with his character's pointed teeth and fingernails, and he gives Nightcrawler's ridiculous German accent his all (the character escaped from a Berlin circus). Nightcrawler is prone to turning into a black vapor (it hangs for a second in the air, looking like brushstrokes on a Brice Marden canvas) and rematerializing in a

new location, and compared with him and the others — they conjure storms, shoot death rays from their eyes, turn you to jelly just by touching you — the humans begin to seem a little dull. But, really, wouldn't they?

X2 has a message for us: Tolerate others different from yourself. Lessons, for me, don't go down too easily at the movies, and this lesson is not so deep that Big Bird and Kermit the Frog couldn't have conveyed it just as well in a single three-minute song.

But for once the director knows this as well as we do; he doesn't take it too seriously, and you don't have to, either. (In one scene Iceman reveals to his family that he's a mutant, and it's a really funny parody of every coming-out scene you've ever suffered through. Mother: "How long have you known you were " Iceman: "A mutant?"")

And actually, Magneto is, by day, in his Sir Ian McKellen incarnation, a big gay rights advocate himself. I guess advocacy is an example of what a Knight Commander of the Royal British Empire does to kill time when not standing before a blue screen, transporting Frodo to Mordor or wreaking destruction on humankind. The problem with casting these knights is that they're older and they might die — Richard Harris did. Then you face the dilemma of whether to recast for the sequel (named what? XXX is used) or using CGI to bring them back to life. If you choose the latter, there are serious ethical questions. Couldn't they look a little younger? Who gets the paycheck? Does the performance Oscar-qualify?



***Identity* too clever for its own good**

Originally published May 1, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



MISTAKEN IDENTITY: Even the ever-adorable Amanda Peet can't save this too-clever ensemble flick. Director James Mangold tries too hard to outwit the audience, and the result is disappointing.

I

identity is a cheat. I kept remembering the season of *Dallas* that turned out to be a dream that one of the characters was having; that's not a clue to *Identity*'s surprise ending, but rather an indication of how far screenwriter Michael Cooney has to reach to bring his material together, and of how much you're likely to enjoy the denouement. (You'll recall that *Dallas* viewers didn't necessarily flood CBS with fan mail.) To say that the film is improbable is to be pointlessly generous. And since the makers of *Identity* were behaving selfishly when they made it, they don't deserve your generosity anyway.

A movie can live through a bad conclusion; *The Truth about Charlie*, for instance, is a recent film that I really love that ends in a fiasco. But *Identity* is dead a long time before the twist rolls around, and the unforgivable ending adds insult to an already-mounting injury.

The plot is a reworking of *Ten Little Indians*, in which a group of travelers, strangers to one another, are stranded by a storm at a remote motel. People, as John Cusack's character Ed later describes it, start dying, and before long the survivors find that they share a strange characteristic: They all were born on May 10. The circumstances of the murders become stranger as we go along and, as in the best of Agatha Christie, things that are happening begin to seem

impossible. The question becomes who will die next, who was present — or not — at the time of the killings, and, most important, how is what's happening possible at all?

It's a good premise and it's been working for a long, long time. The cast of characters assembled for *Identity*, while not likely to occur off a film set, is a promising one, too: There's a call girl (winningly played by Amanda Peet), an ex-cop (Cusack) and the starlet he now chauffeurs (Rebecca De Mornay), a slightly off-kilter family headed by a neurotic stepfather, a young alt-country couple, the slimy motel manager, and, in a scary update, a serial killer (Jake Busey, who looks dangerous in his orange jumpsuit; he plays his part with his head slumped forward so that he's always looking out at you from under a menacing brow) who is being escorted to a hearing by a federal marshal (Ray Liotta).

The suspense, you would think, is built in. But the director, James Mangold, flubs it. He needs to feel he's wowing us instead of just entertaining us — he constantly intervenes in the action with directorial flourishes — and he pays attention to the wrong things. You get shocks when what you need, for instance, is a feel for the motel's physical layout, or the location of a nearby diner. Red herrings are thrown at you relentlessly (a ludicrous device — almost a cruelty — in light of the denouement) such as one in which a "6" on a room door swings loose, becoming a "9;" the camera lingers on it, but it never pays off. And, because *Memento* was a success at the box office, the temporal framework is shuffled, so that you're likely to get a result (the phones go out) well before the cause (a car hits a pole). It's not *The Saragossa Manuscript*, but a map might have been helpful just the same.

Meanwhile, amid the confusion, the really scary moments pass you by. In one scene, the serial killer makes a run for a cluster of buildings across the field from the motel; when he arrives in one, he looks out the window and is surprised to see the motel directly opposite. He becomes disoriented, but we in the audience already were disoriented, and it was only later, while discussing it with a friend, that I could say for sure that the killer's confusion was intentional and not just sloppy continuity.

In another scene, the killer's escort slips off his jacket and we see that the back of his shirt is bloody from a wound we know nothing about. An explanation arrives, but the suspense of wondering what must have happened is lost in the maelstrom. Only once was I legitimately chilled: A young woman is arguing with her boyfriend through a locked door. He falls silent, and from the woman's side of the door we hear him — or someone — speaking in an unintelligible, pleading whisper on the other side.

Identity has a good cast, but you only find out that it's well-enough acted when you're finally told the truth of the film's premise. (I had a similar problem with *The Sixth Sense*; I thought M. Night Shyamalan was directing incompetently because Bruce Willis' character seemed to have no life.) Earlier I wrote that the film was made selfishly, and that's part of what I meant.

But I also mean that the director and screenwriter place a higher value on their own cleverness, on their ability to "outwit" their audience and to make their twist ending the last word in twist endings, than they do on our enjoyment of their work. Alfred Hitchcock is the obvious example when you're discussing cleverness within this genre, and he pulled off plenty of surprises.

But Hitchcock directed with his audience in mind — he wanted to give us something instead of

show off something — and Identity is a mistake he never could have made.



The Real Cancun a real nothing

***The Real Cancun* is a bait-and-switch no matter what you're expecting**

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by [Jake Euker](#)



INTERCHANGABLE KIDS: The hunks and hotties of *The Real Cancun* occupy a space with no screenplay, no responsibility, no direction, no action, and nothing to do but drink and look pretty.

T

he ads for *The Real Cancun* say that the film is brought to us by the producers of MTV's *The Real World*. They're hoping to draw in the same audience that tuned in weekly to see what Puck would cough up this time, or what antics drunken Ruthie would get up to in the hot tub, but really the movie doesn't have anything to do with the TV show.

I'm not a giant *Real World* fan, but I don't think watching it is a pathology, either. I moronically went to this movie thinking that I might have something to say about how the presence of

cameras effects "reality" — because, let's face it, there aren't documentaries playing all over Wichita every day. When would I get the chance?

But *The Real Cancun* is a bait-and-switch no matter what you're expecting.

Watching it is getting fleeced.

Meet Alan, Amber, Ben, Brittany, Casey, David, Heidi, Jeremy, Jorell, Laura, Matt, Nicole, Paul, Roxanne, Sarah and Sky, a group of attractive young men and women (more on that later) who meet in Cancun and stay together at lodgings arranged by the producers of the film, and who attend parties arranged by the film's producers, and who are driven to and fro in the producers' vans. These intrepid young people spend producer-provided cash (if in fact they actually pay for anything — you never see money change hands), and there's even a hairdresser listed in the film's closing credits.

They have problems — they must have — but those don't come up as they did in *The Real World*, however superficially. An example of what passes for a problem here is that Alan has never drunk alcohol in his life; should he now?

The producers, in fact, provide everything in *The Real Cancun*, except something for us to watch and something for his "cast" to do.

This is true exploitation filmmaking.

Nothing happens — almost literally nothing.

The unspoken promise of the film is that you'll get to see the principals naked, and, indeed, there are grainy images of cast members having sex with one another under sheets, and there's a wet T-shirt competition for the women and a Speedo competition for the men.

But the fact is that these young people aren't particularly engaging — I couldn't figure out who was who — and it gets to where even a healthy young person would get tired of seeing them in their swimsuits.

I'm not qualified to comment on the animal allure of the women, but I'm telling you honestly that 15 minutes into *The Real Cancun* I couldn't have cared less if all the men had stripped naked and remained that way for the duration of the film.

Let's take Matt (I think it was Matt) as an example: He had a shaved chest, plucked eyebrows, stylishly spiky hair, a blue bandana, a gold bracelet, baggy swim trunks, gym biceps and ripped abs. Lacking were a Nike tattoo and fake boobs.

There was a director credited for this film, a Rick de Oliveira; his job must have been to oversee camera placement.

The credits listed "extras," which confused me.

At one point Snoop Dogg performs. Cameras lurked beside cast members.

And it's all "real."

Do I believe that this film in some way reflected "reality"? No; it's embarrassing even to bring it up. I don't even believe that Alan had never had a drink.

The only thing I believe for sure is that there was no screenplay.



Pseudoscience at core of *The Core*

The Core is suspenseful, so long as you have a degree in physics and/or fake-scientific doubletalk.

Originally published April 24, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



MINORITY? CHECK. WOMAN? CHECK: The carefully chosen ragtag team of geeks sent to the center of the earth in *The Core* talk the talk, but when they walk the walk, it's strictly pedestrian.

T

he ads for *The Core* should have read, "Earth gets screwed."

Jules Verne started it: In his 19th century novel, he sent a bunch of explorers to the center of the Earth in this giant, screw-shaped locomotive; there they encountered sunless subterranean seas and clues to the origins of man. He didn't worry too much about the science of the thing (although there was a lot of math). He just wanted to give us an adventure to a place he didn't know much about.

Today we know more, but knowing more, in this case, is not a good thing.

The premise of the new film *The Core* is that the center of the earth has stopped rotating, and that this, in turn, has disrupted the electromagnetic field that encircles the planet.

When this happens, the filmmakers tell us, almost any kind of catastrophe you can think of is likely to take place: earthquakes, volcanoes, death rays from the sun, even bird attacks.

What to do?

The answer, of course, is to assemble a team of attractive scientific/military types, including a woman and a minority, and send them to the center of the Earth.

There they will detonate a nuclear weapon that will jump-start the core and make everything OK again.

As I said before, Verne wasn't necessarily into the nuts and bolts of how one penetrates into the Earth's core. He didn't expect us to believe you could drive a screw straight down through 2,000 miles of stone.

The makers of *The Core*, on the other hand, never stop worrying about it.

They want us to know that the science in the film is actually related to real science — in other words, although their journey would require more technological leaps than the Star Wars Defense Initiative, it could actually happen — and they waste a lot of energy showing why their mission is a hard one and yet is one that might take place. They could have a DVD supplement for this film entitled "The Making of the Science Behind The Core."

They want to help us suspend our disbelief, but instead they kind of reassure it.

Fortunately, a lone scientist has been working on this very problem for decades in a remote desert location, just as most of us guessed he had.

That problem tackled (why bring it up?), our journey gets under way, but here another problem reveals itself: Because our explorers (or "terranauts" as they're called here) are traveling in a tunnel they're burrowing as they go, there's not too much for the audience to see except the dirt ahead and the tunnel behind. The filmmakers compensate with a lot of vapory-looking photography and a cave filled with crystals. And there's some molten liquid, too.

But their chief device for filling dead screen time is more fake science.

In one scene, for instance, they discover that they've estimated the density of their surroundings wrong; they explain it in fake scientific terms — it may as well be in Farsi — and we in the audience guess from their facial expressions that this is indeed a big problem and that, unless our heroes are plucky and resourceful, all is lost and the mission is doomed.

It's suspense, but unless you're a physicist you're not likely to be on the edge of your seat.

We're all the time being told there's a deadline — to leave a chamber, to detonate a warhead, to complete the mission — and, because there's no bad guy to speak of, and because we don't know what anyone's talking about, we root for the good guys without knowing why.

Meanwhile, above ground, catastrophes are taking place just as predicted.

These scenes should be a sci-fi screenwriter's dream: The premise gives them a sky's-the-limit breadth of material.

But this dream is more like one that Michael Crichton would have than Verne, and there's not a breath of imagination on display. (Although one early sequence, in which the space shuttle is forced to land in Los Angeles, has some kinetic punch.)

What we get here, exclusively, is the destruction of landmarks: the Colosseum gets it, the Sahara, the Eiffel Tower, and the Golden Gate bridge. *Independence Day* started this disaster convention: Don't blow it up if isn't recognizable, and filmmakers probably like it because they get to travel to Italy. It's a new kind of terrorism where directors cross your borders to eliminate your landmarks on film.

In film terms, though, it's pretty stupid. What 10-year-old couldn't think of razing the Golden Gate? When asked to imagine a disaster, it's almost the first thing that comes to mind.

Hilary Swank stars as a major nicknamed "Beck" (for Rebecca, because "Beck" has more of a tough-yet-tender-hearted feel), and Aaron Eckhart appears opposite her as an almost believable college professor who's a genius at something. Delroy Lindo, Stanley Tucci and Tchekky Karyo are their crewmates, geniuses at something else.

On the surface, Alfre Woodard appears as the mission coordinator; she's a genius at something specific — acting — and she gives her material life against the odds.

And then there's feral little DJ Qualls, cast in what is rapidly becoming the most tiresome of movie clichés: the computer geek, also a genius, but an unorthodox one who needs Hot Pockets to help him think. You know the part.



Corpses delicious for horror fans

Originally published April 17, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)

WANNA SEE
WHAT'S
UNDERNEATH
MY HAT: Cult
movie favorite
Sid Haig stars in
the long-awaited
directorial debut
from rock star
Rob Zombie,
*House of 1000
Corpses*.

R

ob Zombie had an idea. His idea was to make a horror movie that dispensed with all the peripherals — the dead spots, the clichés, the half-hour set-up. He wanted a horror film that was horror from the word go, and one in which every frame was animated by something — anything — scary: a seedy clown, a freak of nature, violent, unexpected movement, bondage, bloodlust, murder. For him, the terror in films is the reward for having sat through the meat and potatoes of plot and character development and all the rest. In his debut film, *House of 1000 Corpses*, he cuts straight to dessert.

By vocation, Zombie is a musician, not a filmmaker, but his cinematic naivety helps to breathe life into what's best about *House of 1000 Corpses*. He understands showmanship, and he knows when a scene needs a boost. Having dispensed with much of what's basic to filmmaking, he feels free to enliven a scene any way he can; he might insert a gratuitous image anywhere, or cut to fake historical footage of Ed Gein, or split the screen, or he might just kill off a character with a shock-cut to a gun blast and worry about the screenplay later.

House of 1000 Corpses isn't a good film, but it's alive on the screen, and that's more than you can say for most other horror films.

Again, I don't wish to give the impression that I'm praising this film.

But those of us who are tired of the dead weight of the Hollywood aesthetic find ourselves watching material that's more and more marginalized — Hong Kong film, vintage exploitation, experimental cinema — just hoping to find something we can honestly respond to.

We want to be surprised for a change, even if it's just for a minute, and *House of 1000 Corpses* offers some surprise.

In an early scene, our soon-to-be-victims venture into a roadside attraction called "The Murder Ride," and this five-minute sequence is like the creepiest music video you've ever seen; it's

shocking and fun, and it actually scares you.

Ditto the appearance of a murderous clown, who contributes very directly to the violent death of another character wearing a monkey mask.

Less fun but just as shocking is the title sequence, in which images of '50s-era pin-up girls are juxtaposed with what appears to be surgical film; it's a dingy amalgam of everything that was scary about Ministry and Tool. (And it has a weird, roadhouse, Wild Angels feel, as though the boys at the Go-Away Garage had gotten their hands on a snuff film and it had transformed their lives.)

Talking about the plot of this film is like talking about the lyrics of a scat song: It's all a riff, and here the source material is mayhem. A skeletal outline would involve two couples whose car breaks down on their way to sight-see at a tree where a legendarily sadistic murderer named Dr. Satan was hanged. A hitchhiker offers them hospitality, but the hospitality turns out to be of the Manson family kind, and before long we're witness to torture, murder, cannibalism — the whole buffet.

If it brings to mind *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, it's because Tobe Hooper had the same big idea Rob Zombie had when he boiled all the nonsense out of

Herschell Gordon Lewis and gave us his masterpiece, and Zombie clearly likes the result. (Sam Raimi had it, too, and his Evil Dead pictures are the classics in the hell-for-leather horror genre. He was so single-minded that he didn't even use topless women.)

We can skip right over a discussion of the acting and most of the cast except to say that Karen Black appears here and that finally, after all these years, she seems to be in on the joke of her own cult status. (Her performance as the aphasic stewardess in *Airport 1975* set the wheels in motion, but it's *Trilogy of Terror* that many of us will never forget. In one segment of that film she's terrorized by a vicious African doll that comes to life; gay men in particular treasure her numb delivery there to the extent that a parody film, titled *Karen Black Like Me*, has a gay man being terrorized under similar circumstances by a gigantic dildo.) Michael Pollard shows up, too, and when you see him it seems inevitable that he would. Lacking is Rob Zombie himself: another surprise.

By its own terms, *House of 1000 Corpses* is a success. In audience terms, it's numbing, and I imagine that most people who see it will turn their heads off about a third of the way through. That's why we need plot and characters, after all.

For horror fans, it's delicious at first.

But all that dessert Zombie supplies is likely to leave you feeling bloated and more than a little sick not long after the lights go down.



Time Changer is a barely disguised sermon

Originally published April 17, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



BACK TO THE FUTURE IT AIN'T: Gavin MacLeod prepares to send D. David Morin into the future (our time) in a film designed to show how the world's gone to hell in the past century.

T

ime Changer is an unsavory piece of Christian propaganda about an 1890s Bible scholar (You can tell he's from the past because he doesn't use contractions: "I am not understanding Professor Anderson's objections!") who visits the present by way of a time machine that one of his colleagues happens to have in his barn.

I'll leave you to guess the impression our godless society leaves upon him, except to say that clearly, in the filmmakers' eyes, the world would be a better place if children were led in Christian prayer at school.

Fortunately only those in youth fellowship groups will see it, and even they may find it hard to sit through: It has no dramatic structure, no believable central conflict, a truly rotten script and acting of the regional music-theater variety. (Our hero, played flaccidly by D. David Morin, has the same reaction to every 21st Century marvel he encounters. "Here's your key," the hotel porter says, handing him a card key. "My key?" he repeats quizzically. "This is the remote." "The

remote?")

Let's name some of the names behind this intolerant Christian masturbation: It was produced by Paul Crouch of the PTL Ministries in Dallas; it was written and directed by Rich Christiano, who, together with his brother, runs the Christiano Film Group; it stars the aforementioned Morin, who is a rising star in Christian film; and Gavin MacLeod, of *Love Boat* fame, shows up, too.

If it seems like I'm being cruel, it's because the film's message is a treasonous, evil one: that the wall of separation between church and state is something that America could do without.



Spirited Away a refreshing mix

Originally published April 10, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



EAST MEETS WEST: *Spirited Away* combines the better elements of Disney-style animation and Japanime influences.



enjoyed the new animated Japanese film *Spirited Away*. (It just took the Oscar for best animated feature.) It's kind of an anime/Disney hybrid, without committing to either.

Lacking from the Disney mold are a lesson about other cultures (you don't even realize how much you resent Disney's soft-serve political correctness until it's missing), a sidekick portrayed

by an energetic comedian using almost off-color street jargon, and the tedious, interchangeable, Oscar-winning songs. Lacking from the anime mold is the cool aloofness. *Spirited Away* is fun without being a lesson, and it welcomes you in.

Twelve-year-old Daveigh Chase, in a good performance, voices Chihiro, a girl whose family, en route to their new home in the suburbs, stops at an abandoned amusement park inhabited by spirits. When her parents trespass on the spirits' world, Chihiro is hauled kicking and screaming into a magical adventure centering on a giant bathhouse, a kind of day spa for overworked ghosts. She proves herself, of course, and rescues her parents, and everyone goes home happy, but along the way the audience is treated to some really imaginative passages and a memorable cast of not-too-treacly characters.

(Contrasting Chihiro to Harry Potter provides a valuable lesson in entitlement, by the way. Is there anything that that winsome little doughboy has to work for? He's a genius wizard by birthright and a quidditch hero without practicing. It's hard to root for a hero who breaks every single little rule without consequences — no consequences, that is, except that he's rewarded for it.)

Part of the fun of *Spirited Away* is in spotting director Hayao Miyakazi's influences. The villain of the piece, Yubaba, is the hard-nosed bathhouse hostess; with her oversized head, on which a wart is centrally placed, she recalls John Tenniell's Duchess from the Alice in Wonderland books, but with a little Arthur Rackham mixed in, too. (Suzanne Pleshette voices this ogress a little too plainly.) No-Face, a Noh theater-derived ghost whom only Chihiro understands, has a pop art feel to him; in one scene, jumping off a bridge, he's a vision out of Peter Max. And among the many attendants at the bathhouse is a variety of creature straight out of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*.

Spirited Away is a little long, and a lot of plot could have been trimmed. The magic tends toward the arbitrary ("Eat this seed or you'll become transparent," or "You have to hold your breath until we get to the end of the bridge") but I enjoyed a lot of the images: a train that runs underwater because of a flood, a hamster who is carted around airborne by a fly because he's too lazy to walk, a trio of disembodied heads who attend to Yubaba, rolling around and bouncing like ugly balls. (In one scene these heads transform into a giant baby without much cause, and it occurred to me that the director may have been influenced by computer games. Probably more and more young directors are.) That being said, the movie held me, which is more than I can say for *Harry Potter*. And, seeing as how Chihiro is shown working, I'm sure that it's better for the kids.



Phone Booth has style, not much else

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by [Jake Euker](#)



TRAPPED: Colin Farrell's good looks add to the visual punch of Joel Schumacher's *Phone Booth*, but in the end, it's not enough to carry a movie.

F

or a film set in a phone booth, *Phone Booth* has some visual flash. In its opening scenes it does justice to Midtown Manhattan, a vertical world which the filmmakers shoot from hip-level, looking upwards. Then and later, when our protagonist is pinned in the booth, the screen is divided with pop-up windows of action taking place elsewhere, arranged for clarity but also for composition. (Sometimes the main image doesn't even fill the screen.) And if you have to look at an actor for an hour and a half, it may as well be someone as handsome as Colin Farrell.

The plot is way beyond plausible. Farrell plays a slick publicist named Stu who takes pleasure in flying by the seat of his pants and who lives for the admiration of his clients, his wife, and his intern, a hanger-on named Adam (Keith Nash). When Stu answers a ringing pay phone in Times Square, he finds himself talking to a killer who is obsessed with him and who threatens to shoot him if he hangs up or leaves the booth. (The killer is voiced by Kiefer Sutherland, whom we see only briefly.) The police, led by Forest Whitaker, become involved when the stalker shoots a pimp. And, of course, the two women in Stu's life — his wife and his would-be mistress, played by Radha Mitchell and Katie Holmes — arrive on the scene. The killer's demand? That Stu come clean, that he introduce the women to one another, admit that his Italian suits are designer knock-

offs, reveal that he is not the player those in his life take him to be.

That's not much to go on, but director Joel Schumacher seems to realize it, and the film is mercifully short. We're meant to dislike Stu in the beginning of the picture, and then come to sympathize with and ultimately admire him by the end. But he's not such a bad guy, and Farrell plays him with too much vulnerability for us to take his transgressions very seriously. I think Schumacher had *Dog Day Afternoon* in mind — a hostage picture in which the lines between hero and villain are blurred. But what he ended up with is more like the opening of *Scream*; it's like innocent little Drew Barrymore picked up the phone and the director kept us there for two hours.



Dreamcatcher sucks

Stephen King films reach a new low with *Dreamcatcher*, the gross-out movie of the year (so far).

Originally published April 10, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



COPROPHILIACS, YOUR MOVIE IS HERE: Never have so many rectal references been packed into one movie not starring Tom Green.

D

reamcatcher is a very, very bad film. I had high hopes for it from the previews, but what looked like a thriller for grown-ups turns out to be a gross-out sci-fi picture that's as stupid as any I've ever seen. I walked out on the matinee I attended (I wasn't the only one who did), and stumbling blind and brain-dead into the sunlit lobby I checked the time and realized that, through commercials, previews, a pointless *Animatrix* featurette, and what I saw of the movie, I had been "entertained" for over two hours. I couldn't take any more.

I didn't see the ending (maybe no one has) but I'll enjoy ruining the rest of it for you.

Dreamcatcher, were it told sequentially, would begin with four boys in rural Maine rescuing a retarded alien boy who is being made to eat dog shit by a group of older bullies. I'm not making this up. Out of gratitude, the alien endows the boys with psychic abilities, which they first use, gratuitously, to rescue another retarded child from a storm drain. Twenty years later, the four get together, as they always do, for their yearly retreat at a remote cabin. Unfortunately, that part of the Maine forest has been invaded by these alien worm things that get into you and live parasitically. These alien worm things exit the body *rectally*. I'm still not making this up. A different kind of alien moves into the body of one of our heroes — it's not a worm, it's more of a person alien — and the two fight for control of the body. I can't believe it myself, but I saw it, and the truth is that the alien speaks in a British accent and the human in an American accent; this is so you can tell who's speaking as the two drive around on a snowmobile arguing with one another, like Ray Milland and Rosey Grier in *The Thing with Two Heads*. In the meantime, a special arm of the military used only for alien invasions has been mobilized. Led by Morgan Freeman, who simply could not have needed money this badly, the unit leads a successful raid against a spaceship parked in the forest. And so on, forever and ever.

Maybe those of you who have seen the preview are struggling with this synopsis. Where, for instance, does the meditating woman-in-the-snow fit in? Who is hit by a car in New York? Why the title *Dreamcatcher*? The answer is that there's even more plot — lots more — than I've gotten to. I haven't read the Stephen King novel — it must be a thousand pages — but if it had to be made into a movie (and I can't think of another reason to write it) maybe the answer was to make it a mini-series. It's already essentially an *It* rewrite, and that novel was entombed within a pair of TV movies, perfect for late-night Sci-Fi Channel programming, so long as no one tries to watch them. As it is, we have a long wait as *Dreamcatcher* cycles through the pay-per-view, cable, the video store, the special edition DVD release, until, at last, like other King vehicles such as *Night Flier*, *Thinner*, *The Mangler*, *Needful Things*, *The Dark Half*, *Graveyard Shift*, *The Running Man*, *Maximum Overdrive*, *Silver Bullet*, *In the Mouth of Madness*, *Christine*, *Sleepwalkers*, *The Langoliers*, and *Firestarter*, it sinks into obscurity.

I feel sorry for the actors in *Dreamcatcher*. I'm saddened to have to report, for example, that Jason Lee plays a character named Beaver and that he has a long scene on a toilet. But what about the director, Lawrence Kasdan, who has a couple of *Star Wars* films under his belt, or the writer, William Goldman, who is an Oscar recipient, and who wrote *All the President's Men*? What about Stephen King? Do these men all have drug problems? Why do they need the cash?



A faithful Quiet American

Michael Caine and Brendan Fraser do Graham Greene right for a change

Originally published April 3, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



NOW THAT'S ACTING: Seasoned pro Michael Caine has learned a thing or two about acting over the years, and remarkably, director Phillip Noyce let him do it.

T

he Quiet American is an unexpected pleasure. I say unexpected because Graham Greene, the author of the novel on which the film is based, is so much a hero of mine that it's hard for movies of his works to live up to what I've found in his prose. You could list a lot of mediocre films that bear his "based upon the novel by" credit: *Travels with my Aunt*, *The Comedians*, recently the horrible *The End of the Affair*. (By contrast, Greene also wrote a couple of screenplays, and these films sparkle, the most famous of them being 1949's *The Third Man*.) *The Quiet American* does what a good Greene film must do: It respects its source.

Set at the very outset of America's involvement in Vietnam, *The Quiet American* tells the story of Alden Pyle, a relief worker sent to the south of that country at a time when the French and the Communists were locked in a battle for its future. Pyle, as he is observed by London *Times*

correspondent Thomas Fowler (it's from his perspective the story is told), is the type of naive, gung-ho, milk-fed civic do-gooder that America in the mid-60s had a corner on; he's a goof and a lunk, and he earnestly quotes books about the importance of containing Communism while rushing into harm's way to inoculate the natives against diseases with unpronounceable names. Fowler, on the other hand, is a man of the world; he has an Asian mistress, a taste for opium and what he thinks of as a bigger (and more jaded) perspective. As the plot unfolds — and Graham Greene works are always painstakingly plotted — we come to see that in this exotic, politically volatile corner of the world, everyone is not necessarily whom they seem to be.

By the time the credits roll, *The Quiet American* has given us a murder, a love triangle and enough near-death experiences to keep the restive in their seats. But the real excitement here is Greene's finely-drawn characters and the two performances that keep them alive. Is there a more solid, more professional actor than Michael Caine working in films at this time? As Fowler, he exhibits the kind of craftsmanship that turns up too rarely. (The latest breed of director seldom allows craftsmanship anymore.) At the outset, when complacency is needed, Caine conveys his character's growing moral and domestic boredom with a couple of lines and some efficient stares; later, when he finds himself duped and his way of life endangered, his contained rage grows organically from the same material. It's a wonderful performance. Brendan Fraser plays Alden Pyle; like Caine, he's a professional who does his job — acts, that is — and here and elsewhere he has shown himself to be a remarkably ego-less actor, unwilling to assert himself to the detriment of a scene. He gives other performers the space they need to perform — a phenomenal quality in a young actor with his good looks and presence. When he and Caine are on the screen together, you're not seeing acting pyrotechnics, but something better: professionalism.

The Quiet American's director, Phillip Noyce, first garnered attention with the thriller *Dead Calm*; he has since moved on to direct such slick action pictures as *Patriot Games* and *Clear and Present Danger*. (His *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is in theaters now.) He directs *The Quiet American* respectfully (it's a relief to see that he knows the difference between Graham Greene and Tom Clancy), and where his action-film devices sneak in, such as during a key bombing scene, it's a forgivable foray into style.

Much has been made elsewhere about the film's portrayal of America's involvement in Vietnam, and about how it mirrors events unfolding now in Iraq, but, honestly, it depresses me too much to go into here. See *The Quiet American* for its stand-alone virtues: Caine, Fraser, Greene's material, a job well done.



Rosemary's Baby back from the dead

Originally published April 3, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



WHO'S HER BABY DADDY?: Mia Farrow in her finest role, as the mother of Satan's spawn in Roman Polanski's very scary *Rosemary's Baby*.

A

t the recent Academy Awards ceremony, Harrison Ford presented Roman Polanski with the Oscar for best director for his work on *The Pianist*. I'm not accustomed to filmmakers I admire receiving Oscars, and in this case I couldn't have been more surprised if Ford had announced that Cher was the winner, and that instead of giving her a statuette they were appointing her to the Supreme Court. I'm enthusiastic about movies I love, and I exaggerate a lot, and I'm therefore prone to describing movies I love as my absolute "favorite" movies; I do it all the time. But when I can get calmed down for a minute, I know that really my very favorite movie is *Rosemary's Baby*. I could watch *Rosemary's Baby* a hundred times — maybe I have. And *Rosemary's Baby* is, of course, a Polanski film.

Is it possible that there are those who don't know the plot? Mia Farrow, in her best performance and her best role, plays a mousy housewife who moves into a new apartment with her actor husband Guy. (Guy is played by John Cassavetes, who has just the right diabolical good looks.) Among their neighbors are a snooping older couple, the Castevets, who engage in typical older New Yorker activities: They go to the theater, they travel a little, she knits and does some baking, he pours drinks in the library, and, as a bonus, they both worship Satan as their Lord. Guy, who is hungry for success, sort of loans his wife's womb to the Castevets, whose job it is to provide

Satan with an heir. And the rest is horror movie history.

Everything about *Rosemary's Baby* shines. The film is hip, funny, and scary, and every little detail is right. (The building where the film takes place is the landmark Dakota, in front of which John Lennon was later gunned down.) Ruth Gordon, as Mrs. Castevet, won the best supporting actress Oscar; it's a legendary performance, a marvel of flipped-out banality wedded with the most casual malevolence ever to grace the screen. The cast is rounded out by too many singular character actors to list here, although I am compelled to mention that one of Elisha Cook, Jr.'s lines — "That's funny. There's a closet behind that dresser. I know there is." — will stay with me to the grave.

During the day, when not writing these columns for *F5*, I work as director of film programming at the Wichita Center for the Arts. In that capacity I'm always alert for an excuse to show *Rosemary's Baby*, and Polanski's Oscar has given me a golden one. The film will screen 8 p.m. on Sunday, April 6, together with the early Polanski short film *Two Men and a Wardrobe*. (It was *Two Men* that first brought Polanski international attention; it's now extraordinarily difficult to find.)

How far, you're wondering, will I be willing to take this oblique self-promotion? The answer is that I'm begging you to attend.



Tears may make you cry

Originally published March 27, 2003

by [Jale Euker](#)



Gritty, because he's sensitive: Bruce Willis as L.T., with his open-mouthed pout of astonishment, indicating danger.



Still wearing eyeliner: Monica Bellucci plays the supermodel doctor, and is poised for stardom with two Matrix films due out soon. No word on crane shots of her breasts in those films, though.

A

ntoine Fuqua's new film, Tears from the Sun, or maybe Tears of the Sun — who cares? The title is meaningless — is another of those "entertainments" that also sets out to teach the audience a serious lesson.

The problem almost always with this type of thing is that the filmmakers don't have a lesson that the audience hasn't already worked out for itself.

In this outing, between crane shots of stacked corpses and a self-described "ringside seat to

ethnic cleansing," we're treated to the message that it is wrong to do nothing in the face of great evil. (An unsettling secondary message seems to be that, without American intervention, the Third World would degenerate into barbarism, cannibalism, and non-Christian worship.)

The film takes as its premise a fictional Nigerian civil war that has unseated the elected president and plunged that country into chaos.

The fact that the screenwriters chose to invent their conflict — and to set it in a recognizable geography — seems to me the grossest of the film's crimes (and there are many).

For them, inventing a war has the obvious advantage of releasing them from responsibility: they can present any horrors they care to without bothering with any kind of messy historical or political context. And America's involvement can be shown to be an act of black-and-white decency.

If the unseated Nigerian president is made up out of thin air, how could America ever have sold him arms or bartered for his country's natural resources? And how can the rebels — portrayed here only as senseless killers — have any justification for their rebellion in a political context that has no history?

History, in *Tears of the Sun*, begins when a special operations commander referred to only as L.T. is ordered into the Nigerian interior with a small company of men to rescue a naturalized American citizen doing humanitarian work as a doctor at a Catholic mission.

Their mission is urgent: Muslim rebels are closing in on the doctor's position, and these rebels, being Muslim, know only rape, murder, and pillaging.

Arriving at the mission, L.T. and his men discover that the doctor is not only a doctor, but also a hard-headed, female, whitish, supermodel doctor who is unwilling to abandon her post without her (black Christian) people; what follows is a tale of courage so facile and off-handedly racist that only Hollywood could have invented it.

Confusing slaughter with action, the camera lingers on the most horrible of the atrocities it subsequently documents, cutting away to American soldiers who are actually crying, or to Nigerians who wail helplessly until they are told to take cover or to wait here.

Bruce Willis plays L.T., expressing emotion with a range of pouts that audiences around the world must now be familiar with: twisting the pout indicates a moral dilemma whereas an open-mouthed pout shows astonishment.

When, at the end, he limps bloodily across the Cameroon border into safety, it's the usual American-as-martyr bullshit that Sylvester Stallone pioneered for us with the *First Blood* films, and, believe you me, Willis knows the part.

Monica Bellucci is the doctor; an Italian with lusty, full-blooded epics like *Brotherhood of the Wolf* under her belt, she is poised for stardom with two *Matrix* films due out soon. Here her cleavage is shot from above often enough to tell us why the director felt she was right for the role; it's unfair to her, of course, but she's not given enough material to turn in a real performance

anyway, and it would be more unfair to judge her as an actress from this role. As a gauge of how wholesome and motherly the Catholic volunteers are, Fionnula Flanagan, the housekeeper from *The Others*, is among those too dedicated to leave her post.

Tears from the Sun, or whatever it's called, is offensive, but it's stupid too.

At the outset, Willis and Bellucci march overnight to a rendezvous point where a helicopter will whisk them to safety; flying out, the helicopter passes right over the mission they left the day before, and the pilot indicates that they saw the mission on the way in, too. Tom Skerritt, as Willis's commanding officer, is shown time and again yelling into a mobile phone on the deck of an aircraft carrier with planes landing behind him one after another. And at one point the screenwriters indicate that the son of the elected president is, by birthright, his father's lawful replacement; with democracy like that, you begin to see why the rebels rebelled.

The night I saw *Tears of the Sun*, President Bush was on television giving Saddam Hussein his 48-hour deadline to leave his country. Most of us will never feel this war in a real way; we'll never experience curfews, for instance, or suffer an interruption in our fresh water supply. Maybe it was a timing thing, but somehow I wasn't in the mood to watch a woman, a new mother, dying in the mud after being raped and having her breasts cut off by a Muslim man, to watch Bruce Willis look away in horror and moral outrage, and to be told that, as an American, I was different from the people who could do this — that I cared.



Oscars, because you asked

Originally published March 20, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



n 1975, Ronee Blakely, in the film *Nashville*, gave the best performance by an actress in a supporting role. I was 13 then, and I could see this. It was an objective fact. When, somehow, mistakenly, Lee Grant was instead awarded the Oscar for her performance in *Shampoo*, I was so flabbergasted that I actually destroyed the little Sony tape recorder that I had been recording the ceremony on. I didn't know what else to do.

I should have stopped watching then, but I didn't. My night just got worse: Milos Forman was somehow allowed to take home the Oscar that anyone could see Robert Altman had earned. Louise Fletcher was given the best actress Oscar for what was really a supporting actress role. And, worst of all, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the film that had spawned the above mentioned crimes, stole the best picture Oscar from *Nashville*.

I'm still kind of bitter about this today, 27 years later. I've stopped blaming Milos Forman for it

and thus have stopped publicly declaring that I "hate" him, and I can watch Lee Grant perform without thinking of her as a rapist and a thief. (Although I saw her the other night in a terrible '70s disaster film called *The Swarm*, about killer bees, and I was gratified that her role and performance sucked. At least she worked. Ronee Blakely's career pretty much went up in smoke after *Nashville*; the only other time I remember seeing her was as the mother in *Nightmare on Elm Street*.)

All of this goes to explain how it was that I started the long and complicated process of not caring who or what wins Oscars. Even today it's sometimes pretense; it's mainly an act, for instance, when I pretend not to be enraged that Mel Gibson was given a best director Oscar — one of those "directors," like Kevin Costner, who has both an Oscar on his mantle and a personal trainer in his home gym. As a protection to myself, I sometimes pretend not to know that fact if it comes up ("Mel Gibson? For what?"), and I'm forbidden to try to remember which talented directors he beat. But on my good days, I really do forget who and what have been awarded Oscars in the past — not the historic debacles, like *How Green Is My Valley* beating *The Maltese Falcon* and *Citizen Kane* for best picture, or *The Greatest Show on Earth* being nominated for best picture and then winning it, but the (comparatively) little ones, like the presence, in lists of best picture winners, of *Driving Miss Daisy*, *Chariots of Fire* and *Platoon*.

You want my picks for the Oscars this year? Really, you don't. I don't know and at least part of me doesn't care. But here it goes:

Best picture: My hunch is that *Chicago* will pick this up, and my fear is that *The Hours* will. My pick is *Femme Fatale*, but since that film was not only not nominated but also vilified by the critics, I'll be rooting for *The Pianist*.

Best actress: Surely Nicole Kidman will take this award for her performance as Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*. I hated the movie, but she was great — wasn't she? — and anyway, if you're beautiful and you put on an ugly fake nose, Hollywood sees that as a sign of bravery, and bravery wins Oscars. (When Donna Reed played a whore in *From Here to Eternity*, they practically overnighted her statuette to her.) In a perfect world, Isabelle Huppert would take the stage and accept her Oscar for *The Piano Teacher*, but, again, there was an oversight in the nomination process, apparently, and it's too late in the history of humanity to get started on this whole thing now.

Best actor: I don't have the faintest idea. My thinking is that Jack Nicholson has gotten his share of Oscars; he's been rewarded for what he does, which is pretty much a variation on a theme. I liked Adrien Brody in *The Pianist*, but I would be kind of embarrassed for him if he won, because it would amount to over-praising him. My choice would be Daniel Day-Lewis for *Gangs of New York*; he was funny and commanding, and he seemed to be enjoying himself. My best (but still worthless) guess is that the Academy will think so too.

Best director: Rob Marshall has already won this for *Chicago* by picking up the Directors' Guild of America award. They've differed with the Academy so few times that they've become a kind of early warning system. Roman Polanski, whose likeness should appear on postage stamps for his work on *Rosemary's Baby* and *Chinatown*, is the miracle I'm hoping for.

Best supporting actor: Chris Cooper had the crowns on his front teeth removed for his

performance in *Adaptation*, and that shows bravery (see "best actress" above). I liked *Adaptation* and would like to see it win something, and Cooper was treacherous yet likable in it. Still, Christopher Walken did a hell of a job in *Catch Me If You Can*; he's not likable, but he's an actor of enormous skill. It's a toss-up, but I'll call it Cooper by a nose (see "best actress" above).

Best supporting actress: One of the really hilarious things about *Adaptation* was Meryl Streep's marvelous, self-mocking performance. (The show of regret she produces before pronouncing Nicholas Cage's death sentence was one of the sublime comedic moments of the past few years.) I'll root for her, but I won't be surprised if the Oscar goes to Julianne Moore for *The Hours*, and I won't be angry about it, either. The only thing I'm sure of now is that the Oscar won't go to Ronee Blakely. This year my plan is to pretend not to care.



Modern Pied Piper flick is an unexpected trip

Originally published March 20, 2003

by [Jake Euker](#)



THE OLD RAT-CATCHER HIMSELF: Cult movie icon Crispin Hellion Glover seems ideally cast in the updated Willard. As companion pieces to the film, he recorded a new version of Michael Jackson's classic rat love song "Ben," and directed a video to go with it.

I

went to the westside Warren to see Willard. Before the movie, a promo spot came on with Bill Warren seated in one of his theaters looking up at the screen, where a montage of nostalgia-tinged, homey images from around the city are being projected. At the end of the spot, Warren addresses the camera, saying that it's time for Wichita "to believe again." Unfortunately there was something wrong with the equipment at this particular screening, and the soundtrack was distorted; the music came out sounding like a sinister, daringly experimental composition, something Throbbing Gristle might have made. My friends and I watched in horror as faces materialized in the skies above the prairie and a little girl, in fast motion, ran into the ominously waiting arms of her grandmother. "It's like the Kronos Quartet," said my friend on the right.

"This isn't happening," my other friend said. "Warren mind control."

As it worked out, the spot matched the mood for Willard, which opens with a title sequence that's part *Myst*, part *Brothers Quay*. From this we move into a gothic black comedy (and it's good that the filmmakers chose that tack: I was 9 when the original Willard was released and even then I was aware of how dumb it was) in which our title character lives in a Psycho-derived mansion with his ancient mother and a basement full of rats. Willard, as everyone must know by now, ends up befriending the rodents, and, with their help, he extracts a bloody revenge against his enemies — chiefly his boss at a dreary manufacturing firm that might have been a set in Barton Fink.

When Pauline Kael reviewed *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, she lodged the valid complaint that for the first hour of the movie, the car doesn't even fly. What, she asked, did the filmmakers think that the audience had come to see? Willard is that way, too: For an eternity, the director sets up plot, but no action, while the audience makes do with attacks on car tires and an off-screen murder, all the while waiting, waiting. Willard, the character, is overdeveloped; the filmmakers may have been too intelligent for their camp material, and they spend a lot of energy on providing background material that we don't need, and on atmosphere, trick shots, film in-jokes and so on. And they provide the basis for a theory — that the rats aren't real at all, but rather the product of Willard's imagination, and that it's him doing the killing — only to rather pointlessly throw it away by allowing an EMS worker to see them toward the end.

For a lot of us, the real attraction of Willard is that it's part freak show, and for anyone old enough to remember the '80s, the freak that we're going to see is Crispin Glover.

His scary energy helped to animate his best films, like *Back to the Future* and *Twister*, but his scary energy was legitimate — it was no act — and Hollywood soon found him too edgy and crazy to bother with. (His David Letterman appearance — in which he gave out his home phone number and landed a ninja kick inches from the host's face — didn't help.)

Glover has grown up, but that's not necessarily what Willard needs; he doesn't have the intensity he once did, and at the film's climax, when scary is needed, he provides it in the traditional way: he acts.

What was most interesting to me, checking back on him after all these years, was his diction: He has an edgy weakness to his delivery that reminds me of a certain kind of post-modern hipster you saw a lot of in the late '80s, the kind who wore black patent leather shoes, said "actually" a lot, and listened to the Smiths and the Cure. Whenever Glover speaks in this film, it's like a trip in the Way-Back Machine, and I'm not sure if he's acting or if the '90s passed him by. When he says to his favorite rat, Socrates, "Let's go to bed," I found that that song was already playing in my head.



Oh yeah, the Oscars...

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by [Jake Euker](#)



NO OSCAR FOR YOU! Real life country singer Ronee Blakely (top) didn't win an Oscar for her outstanding work in Robert Altman's *Nashville* in 1975. Rebecca Romijn-Stamos (center) won't win one this year for her dual role in Brian DePalma's *Femme Fatale*, nor will Isabelle Huppert (bottom) take home a statue for her stellar performance in *The Piano Teacher*. Those are the breaks.



n 1975, Ronee Blakely, in the film *Nashville*, gave the best performance by an actress in a supporting role. I was 13 then, and I could see this. It was an objective fact. When, somehow, mistakenly, Lee Grant was instead awarded the Oscar for her performance in *Shampoo*, I was so flabbergasted that I actually destroyed the little Sony tape recorder that I had been recording the

ceremony on. I didn't know what else to do.

I should have stopped watching then, but I didn't. My night just got worse: Milos Forman was somehow allowed to take home the Oscar that anyone could see Robert Altman had earned. Louise Fletcher was given the best actress Oscar for what was really a supporting actress role. And, worst of all, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the film that had spawned the above mentioned crimes, stole the best picture Oscar from Nashville.

I'm still kind of bitter about this today, 27 years later. I've stopped blaming Milos Forman for it and thus have stopped publicly declaring that I "hate" him, and I can watch Lee Grant perform without thinking of her as a rapist and a thief. (Although I saw her the other night in a terrible '70s disaster film called *The Swarm*, about killer bees, and I was gratified that her role and performance sucked. At least she worked. Ronee Blakely's career pretty much went up in smoke after Nashville; the only other time I remember seeing her was as the mother in *Nightmare on Elm Street*.)

All of this goes to explain how it was that I started the long and complicated process of not caring who or what wins Oscars. Even today it's sometimes pretense; it's mainly an act, for instance, when I pretend not to be enraged that Mel Gibson was given a best director Oscar — one of those "directors," like Kevin Costner, who has both an Oscar on his mantle and a personal trainer in his home gym. As a protection to myself, I sometimes pretend not to know that fact if it comes up ("Mel Gibson? For what?"), and I'm forbidden to try to remember which talented directors he beat. But on my good days, I really do forget who and what have been awarded Oscars in the past — not the historic debacles, like *How Green Is My Valley* beating *The Maltese Falcon* and *Citizen Kane* for best picture, or *The Greatest Show on Earth* being nominated for best picture and then winning it, but the (comparatively) little ones, like the presence, in lists of best picture winners, of *Driving Miss Daisy*, *Chariots of Fire* and *Platoon*.

You want my picks for the Oscars this year? Really, you don't. I don't know and at least part of me doesn't care. But here it goes:

Best picture: My hunch is that Chicago will pick this up, and my fear is that *The Hours* will. My true pick is *Femme Fatale*, but since that film was not only not nominated but also vilified by the critics, I'll be rooting for *The Pianist*.

Best actress: Surely Nicole Kidman will take this award for her performance as Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*. I hated the movie, but she was great — wasn't she? — and anyway, if you're beautiful and you put on an ugly fake nose, Hollywood sees that as a sign of bravery, and bravery wins Oscars. (When Donna Reed played a whore in *From Here to Eternity*, they practically overnighted her statuette to her.) In a perfect world, Isabelle Huppert would take the stage and accept her Oscar for *The Piano Teacher*, but, again, there was an oversight in the nomination process, apparently, and it's too late in the history of humanity to get started on this whole thing now.

Best actor: I don't have the faintest idea. My thinking is that Jack Nicholson has gotten his share of Oscars; he's been rewarded for what he does, which is pretty much a variation on a theme. I liked Adrien Brody in *The Pianist*, but I would be kind of embarrassed for him if he won, because it would amount to over-praising him. My choice would be Daniel Day-Lewis for *Gangs*

of New York; he was funny and commanding, and he seemed to be enjoying himself. My best (but still worthless) guess is that the Academy will think so too.

Best director: Rob Marshall has already won this for Chicago by picking up the Directors' Guild of America award. They've differed with the Academy so few times that they've become a kind of early-warning system. Roman Polanski, whose likeness should appear on postage stamps for his work on Rosemary's Baby and Chinatown, is the miracle I'm hoping for.

Best supporting actor: Chris Cooper had the crowns on his front teeth removed for his performance in Adaptation, and that shows bravery (see "best actress," above). I liked Adaptation and would like to see it win something, and Cooper was treacherous yet likable in it. Still, Christopher Walken did a hell of a job in Catch Me If You Can; he's not likable, but he's an actor of enormous skill. It's a toss-up, but I'll call it Cooper by a nose (see "best actress," above).

Best supporting actress: One of the really hilarious things about Adaptation was Meryl Streep's marvelous, self-mocking performance. (The show of regret she produces before pronouncing Nicholas Cage's death sentence was one of the sublime comedic moments of the past few years.) I'll root for her, but I won't be surprised if the Oscar goes to Julianne Moore for The Hours, and I won't be angry about it, either. The only thing I'm sure of now is that the Oscar won't go to Ronee Blakely. This year my plan is to pretend not to care.



***Old School* has been done, but at least it's not Important**

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by [Jake Euker](#)



IT'S NOT BAD. It's just edited that way: Will Ferrell is no John Belushi, but it's OK. It may be garbage, but at least that's all it's trying to be.



A WOOLF BY ANY OTHER NOSE: Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf and Miranda Richardson as Vanessa Bell in an Important movie, *The Hours*.



ARTSY COMMIES IN SPACE: Step inside your head for a trip to the stars in the original *Solaris*, shot in 1972 in Soviet Russia.

OLD SCHOOL

Does it really matter that the continuity sucks in the new Todd Phillips comedy *Old School*, or that the lighting is all-purpose, or that the editing undermines some of what should have been the really funny parts? Of course it doesn't. I'm a big fan of bad comedy, especially *Half-Baked* and *Tommy Boy*, and my feeling is that if you're going to those films with an eye toward continuity or lighting — or even coherence — then you may as well have stayed home. It's mean-spirited and stupid to apply high standards to garbage that aspires only toward garbagehood.

Old School is a kind of *Animal House* for a new generation. Its premise revolves around a fraternity opened by a trio of thirty-somethings who are sick of the responsibilities of families and jobs, and would like to party a lot more and get more variety in bed. Will Ferrell, in the Bluto role, is a little less scary than John Belushi was. You get the sense of a person buried within him, whereas Belushi was like having a wolverine loose in the home. Luke Wilson, who was funnier playing it straight in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, is the good guy. And Vince Vaughn is flip and likeable as the brains of the operation, an entrepreneur who owns a chain of electronics stores called Speaker City; he's the kind of asshole who does his own TV commercials and tells his kids to cover their ears before extolling the virtues of sex with strangers in waterbeds. (In one scene, he tries to impress a young woman by telling her that he put up the heavy metal posters in his bedroom himself.)

I didn't see *Road Trip*, Phillips's last big movie, mostly because I would rather drink a quart of my own urine than sit through ninety minutes of Tom Green. (I also missed Phillips's 1998 feature *Frat House*, but I think I can guess.) *Old School* gets off to a slow start, but it finds its

feet: Ferrell takes a Mexican tranquilizer dart in the neck and subsequently ruins a children's party, Andy Dick teaches a class on giving blow-jobs during the course of which he lets out a memorable ninja cry, and, for those of us who were beginning to wonder, Luke Wilson finally takes off his shirt.

You don't need to run stoplights getting to the theater — the video will do — but *Old School* fulfills your expectations.

It's funny, but not much.

THE HOURS

Which is more than I can say for *The Hours*. I mention it now — and it depressed me so badly that I had vowed to myself never to mention it again — only because I don't think I can stand to see another favorable word about it in print. Yes, it's true that there are extraordinary performances here, especially Nicole Kidman's as Virginia Woolf. (Is Woolf's physical appearance really so well remembered that a false nose is necessary for Kidman? I can't picture the author, and I've read her books.) But the movie cannot transcend the deadly gloom of the novel (which I couldn't read, and I tried) and, since it had no lesson for me, I can't imagine why anyone would willingly go to see it. Defenders of *The Hours* tell me that it's a meditation on the choices that confront women, or about the burden of mental illness and the way that the choices that confront women exacerbate it, or that it's about all of these things, or whatever.

But for me it's more untruthful than instructive or insightful. The movie says that these women portray women everywhere, and then it gives them no real options; they make bad decisions because those are the only decisions available to them.

There's not a breath of humor — not one little joke — in the entire two hour length; that's a sign of Importance, and Importance can be pretty hard to take.

SOLARIS

There will be a single showing of Andrei Tarkovsky's 1972 Soviet film *Solaris* at 7 p.m. Monday, March 24 at the Wichita Center for the Arts. *Solaris* is a notoriously difficult film: it's long (three hours plus), it's meditative rather than action-driven, and it bears its director's trademark narrative deviation and depth. (Tarkovsky is willing to shut down the plot in *Solaris*, for instance, for a very long sequence in which a retired astronaut is driven through a futuristic city in which the viewer is given long takes of highways, skylines, and a child fidgeting in the car.)

Stephen Soderbergh, who remade the film last year with George Clooney, pared down the plot: a psychologist is sent to a space station circling the planet of the title; on this planet exists an ocean that seems to respond to the thoughts and feelings of those observing it, and this creates havoc — and sometimes terror — aboard the station as loved ones of the astronauts are brought back to a

kind of life.

Soderbergh's was a pretty empty vessel, but Tarkovsky's massive effort is one of my favorite science fiction films. It's unique: a sci-fi feature wherein most of the exploration is done within the human soul, a kind of obverse of what we usually expect from the genre. (Tarkovsky intended it as a more human answer to *2001*, which he found too cold.)

It's simple in a way, but also inscrutable.

How inscrutable? Two years ago, this film was screened at WSU from videotape. When the projectionist went to change tapes, she found that part two had already played and that part one was waiting to go in, and no one in the audience had known to complain.

Solaris really *is* an important film; it was a major success for Mosfilm in the USSR, it survived the usual Soviet censorship battles and it took the Palme d'or at Cannes.

And yet Tarkovsky found room for humor amid all his meanings; in one scene, for instance, an astronaut refuses to let a colleague into his room. As the two talk through the crack in the door, something begins banging against it, and a minute later a dwarf escapes and takes off down the hallway. The astronaut captures the dwarf and puts him back in the room, and the two continue their talk as though nothing had ever happened.

